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Deep Magic would like to welcome its two newest editors: Steven Richards and Matthew Winslow. Both bring tremendous talent to our staff and we look forward to working with them. Join us in welcoming them to Deep Magic!

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Note from the Editors

"To the best of our knowledge, our Sun is the only star proven to grow vegetables."
--Stanford Solar physicist Phillip Scherrer

July 2003

Welcome to the "Summer Delirium" issue of Deep Magic. Hot out, isn't it? Ever notice how the heat does funny things to the mind, and the imagination? At Deep Magic we often receive great submissions that are slightly to the left of High Fantasy and Science Fiction; works traipsing along the edge of the imagination's abyss that we just can't seem to let go of. So we've collected them here, in a special issue devoted to the odd, the bizarre, the heat-induced mirages of the mind.

Just what is that six-limbed creature approaching through the shimmering waves of a desert horizon? Vegetables aren't the only thing our star grows. Sit down for a strange tale with "Confessions of a 150-Foot Grasshopper."

We've all heard the happy ending of the story of the frog prince. But have you heard about his cousin "Ollie," a prince among frogs?

And you know, you'd think you could relax by the pool on a vacation and offer to sell your soul without the actual devil showing up. And once there, you would hardly expect him to down a Foster's and negotiate the terms of your eternal torment by telling you, "It's the Economy, Stupid."

We've got an art collector who does something unthinkable to acquire the perfect painting, a civil war battlefield doctor who finds some solace in the prose of a woman before his time, a woman who absorbs books in a very unusual way, and a young shoeblack with some sinister connections. We're finishing up "Found Things" this issue as well, and we have Jeff Wheeler's "New York Field Trip" at Bantam Dell to boot.

If you're enjoying the quality and quantity of work put out by the Deep Magic crew, why not go to our website and give your electronic applause by voting for the Lamp Post awards? We, too, want to thank our many contributors, and what better way than having their fans vote for them?

We are also pleased to announce the release of Jeff Wheeler's novel LANDMOOR. For those who remember, it was first serialized in the early issues of Deep Magic, and now we offer this trade paperback to you, our readers. It will be available to order this month at most on-line bookstores and can be ordered at a bookstore near you. Please let us know if you have any problems getting a copy. The profits from the sales will go into supporting the operating costs of Deep Magic, which we would like to include paying our submitting authors and artists. If you believe in Deep Magic and our commitment to quality, buy a copy for your local school or library as well. Help us share these "safe places for minds to wander" with others.

We at Deep Magic think you're going to enjoy this issue. Sit back, open up the windows, grab a cool drink, vegetate, and let the summer delirium take your mind where it will.

All the best,
The Editors

Safe Places for Minds to Wander

Writing Challenge

Our June challenge was quite successful. We received a number of fine submissions, and the Editor's picks are listed below. We hope you enjoy these challenge submissions as much as we did. We've lined up another challenge for this month, so don't be shy. Remember, this doesn't have to be a polished piece; it's an exercise. So flex your brain and give the challenge a shot. Just be sure to send us your submissions by the 15th to writingchallenge@deep-magic.net. Here are last month's submissions.

Untitled by Steve Poling
Untitled by Chet Cox
Pestilence Fire by R.G. Faulkner
Apocalypse Watch by Amy Butler
Sunset by Steven Richards
Uktena's Heirs by A.M. Stickel

We also want to mention that writing challenge submissions are rarely edited by our staff. These submissions are exercises and not meant to be polished.

July 2003 Writing Challenge

The tavern. Cliché or necessary plot device? Many fantasy stories have one. You know, the place where the main character meets up with the secret informant, or the sagely mentor. (In Science Fiction, the tavern is often replaced with the off-world bar.) Does your story have one? Should it?

Write a scene in a tavern of your imagining, and don't skimp on the details. Describe the clientele, the staff, the beverages, the name, the location of the place--whatever makes it wonderful and strange. Oh, and to make it more challenging, while you're describing everything, try to give your reader a hint of mysterious goings-on as well. A meeting between wizards, a sale of intergalactic info, an exchange of messages that could mean the downfall of a kingdom or the rising of a new hero. Put a little description, and a little story, into 500 words or less, and let us visit the tavern in your mind.

June 2003 Writing Challenge: The challenge for June was to write a short story with the following first line: "The ground shuddered like an old woman warding off the chill of a winter morning, and then all was still."

Untitled
By Steve Poling

"The ground shuddered like an old woman warding off the chill of a winter morning, and then all was still."

"What's that supposed to mean, Grampa?"

"I don't know. That's how my grandfather always started the story."

"Why not tell the story your way?"

"OK, but just this once. My grampa stood in the middle of his hayfield when he felt the ground shake. He looked around and didn't immediately see anything, but after a moment he saw a vapor trail descending to the southeast corner of Pearson's cornfield. After a moment, he saw black smoke rising from over the hilltop between him and that point."

"What'd he do next?"

"You know darned well what he did next. Quit interrupting me."

"Gramps was a young boy at the time. His bum hip wouldn't bother him for a few decades so he ran directly to see what happened. Along the way he wondered if that boom he'd heard before the ground shook had anything to do with what had happened."

"Would that be a sonic boom, Grampa?"

"Yes, it was. But he didn't know about sonic booms back then. That was before the Second World War. Anyway he got to the top of the hill between him and Pearson's cornfield and he saw a big gash torn into the earth. At the end of the gash, the corn was on fire, and at the center of the fire he saw a cylinder glowing red. He stayed back and watched from the hillside.

"After five minutes or so old man Pearson showed up with some young relative of his wife's who was visiting the farm."

"'What's going on?' Pearson asked. Grampa described what he'd seen. Pearson shrugged and racked in two shells into his double barreled shotgun. They went down the hill, all three of them.

"When they got near the cylinder it had quit glowing red, but it was too hot to touch. Then the end of the cylinder sticking out of the ground started to turn. It turned for a solid five minutes before it came out and clattered to the ground.

"Pearson's nephew or something peered into the darkness to see what was in the cylinder.

"A red ray flashed from the cylinder just missing the kid and singing his hair.

"Pearson unloaded both barrels as soon as he saw the flash. Double ought buckshot rattled round inside the cylinder. He reloaded, ready for more trouble. Nothing happened.

"'Orson, you OK, boy?' Pearson asked without taking his eyes off the cylinder.

"'Yessir, just my hair's singed.'

"'Good, we gotta make sure nothing's alive in that thing. Take another look.'

"'You sure you don't want to?'

"'I got the shotgun. You've looked once and lived to tell about it.'

"'I suppose I have. I'll have to think about this when I get back to New York.'

"And that's what happened. Pearson's double-ought had made mincemeat of the tentacled critters in the cylinder and Pearson's nephew or something made a big name for himself in radio and movies.

"And that's what happened on Pearson's old Rosebud farm when my grampa was a boy."

Untitled
By Chet Cox

The ground shuddered like an old woman warding off the chill of a winter morning, and then all was still. I stared at the strange sausage-shaped aircraft, wondering why it wasn't red-hot after such a rapid descent. And I wondered why these things only landed in near-deserted rural areas. Finally, the airlock opened.

The traveller made the usual frantic hand signals; perhaps more than usual. Certainly more than necessary. And this traveller across light-years, this advanced being who had access to technology which theorists and science fiction nuts could only dream about, removed his (I assume he was a "he.") shiney mirrored helmet and imparted his wisdom.

"Greetings, Earthling!"

I groaned. It was one of those extra-terrestials. But I put up my bravest smile. I'd never figured out why they always found me. Maybe there are other people that these things meet with; maybe that's the source of all these silly stories. And maybe everyone else either pumps up their story a bit. Or maybe I've just been lucky.

It didn't matter to me. After 30 minutes of negotiation, he left with a signed deed granting him mining and building rights to North America and part of the Dominican Republic. And I had several more bars of trilithium in my truck.

They always found me, wherever I went, whenever I was out in the boonies somewhere between this destination and that. Never have figured it out. Maybe that first e-t told all his friends that I was the biggest sucker in the galaxy, that I sold land at dirt (heh!) cheap prices. And maybe I'd be worried that eventually he and his buddies would take me apart when they found out I had snookered them.

But that first guy let me know that they haven't broken the speed of light either. It'll take at least another two years for that first chap to return. Before that time, I'll have enough trilithium to power my ship and break free of this gravity.

I hate running out of gas on primitive worlds.

Pestilence Fire
By R.G. Faulkner

The ground shuddered like an old woman warding off the chill of a winter morning, and then all was still. Not a sound could be heard; not the wind that slowly rustled the leaves of the great stand of Birch trees that lie just yards beyond the crater or the birds that chirped only moments before from within them. The trees were smoldering and leafless, stripped and singed by the great blast. Nothing stirred or moved except for a young man that lay on his stomach inside the immense crater. His arms flailed and his hands fought loose, blackened dirt for handholds as he struggled to drag himself to the top. Suddenly, as he reached the very crest, he stopped moving. He hung there just on the periphery, motionless. He appeared dead.

"Dureck!" The scream cut through the silence. "Dureck!"

Leana ran up and reached down to him, placing a hand on each shoulder. She began to tug franticly, fighting desperately with his weight to pull him up and out of the pit. With each tug, the dirt released great wafts of sulfur and pitch that flooded her nostrils with an urgent need to sneeze. "Why do you have to be so heavy?" Finally, with much effort, she got him up over the crown and rolled him over to see a broad smile on an ashen, black face. Yet he did not move and his open eyes seemed to stare far away into the nothingness of the beyond.

"Blasted fool, look at you." She reached into her pack and quickly found a cloth. Drenching it with water, she began to delicately wipe away the ash and soot that painted his face. With each wipe she exposed pink, bubbled skin. "You stubborn mule." She noticed a tear was running down her cheek and the realization made her pause a moment. "We told you, didn't we? But you had to try, didn't you? You couldn't listen to us. Now…" she hesitated and closed her eyes. "Now look at you." She slammed her hand into his chest in anger and grief. She pulled him up into her arms and began to sob.

"Why must you always be dramatic?" Leana heard the voice come strolling from beyond the trees towards her. It was emotionless and carefree, as if it had not heard or seen the giant explosion or the great column of fire that had flung itself to the heavens. Almost as if it was unable to see now the cavernous pit it approached or smell the suffocating stench of burnt soil that permeated the air. Leana felt herself flush with anger.

"Get over here and help me, Marthis." She could not hide her emotions.

"Is he alive?" His words were full of unconcern.

"You're the healer. You tell me. Is this the face of someone alive?"

She watched Marthis bend down and check him closely. His pale hand touched the hot, pink skin. It traced the outline of Dureck's face and worked its way down to his chest. It hovered there as if it was searching for some sign. She looked up into Marthis' eyes seeking desperately for confirmation of her greatest fear.

She choked. "Is he alive?" She fought desperately to hide the immense feeling of helplessness.

"Yes," he said. "Do you know the jukingail plant?"

"The red leaved bush with the pinkish berries?"

"Yes, gather me two handfuls of the berries. I'll make a suave. It will help. Look at his hands." She looked down to see the backsides of his hands were completely filled with the blistering of burnt flesh. Taking them in her own, she gasped as she turned them over and witnessed the sight of the black flesh that was his palms, charred and cracked exposing whitish-pink flesh underneath

what used to be covered by skin. Her eyes filled with horror.

"Oh lord, his hands are ruined. How will he…"

Marthis cut her off. "Go get the jukingail. Hurry. We have little time."

Apocalypse Watch

By Amy Butler

The ground shuddered like an old woman warding off the chill of a winter morning, and then all was still.

"Would you stop it?" Asealia demanded, glaring.

The child laughed and clapped his hands together. Asealia glowered, because she knew he could understand her perfectly and was just choosing to ignore her.

"I know you think it's funny," she said. The baby tried to throw a fist full of sand at her. "But your little earthquake here might mean apocalypse for some mortal race!"

The toddle rocked onto his back and lay there, looking up at the sky and cooing.

"I know you can understand me," Asealia said loudly, balling up her hands into fists. "So understand this, mister. Try that again and I won't hesitate to punish you!"

Asealia turned her back on the boy, who was trying to suck on one of his toes, and stomped off to sit on a rock. "Immortals," she muttered under her breath.

She knew enough about punishment to inflict some pure torture on that child. Being stuck in this desolate nursery was enough to drive a mortal insane. Luckily, Asealia was only half mortal – but far enough down the divine totem pole that she got stuck babysitting the newest arrivals in the cosmos. Need a babysitter for your demi-god baby while you and your husband spend a romantic evening plotting the demise of a people? Ring for Asealia. Leave it to her to make sure your devil child doesn't cause the end of the world.

Stars, she wasn't paid enough.

In the distance, a fork of lightening flickered in the sky. The baby giggled. Asealia jumped up from the rock, frowning severely.

"Young man, I saw that! How many times have I told you never to play with electricity!"

Sunset
By Steven Richards

The ground shuddered like an old woman warding off the chill of a winter morning, and then all was still. A hush settled over the crowd. It was not the ordinary, whisper-punctuated quiet of such crowds, but rather total silence, unmarred by the shuffling of feet or the clearing of throats.

The wedding had gone off flawlessly. Nobody had lost the ring, no avenging fairy godmothers or uninvited guests had shown up to curse everyone in sight. Neither bride nor groom had spontaneously turned into a frog, and, on the whole, everybody was very pleased with this. The kiss at the end had been enough to make a few members of the audience swoon.

And then something had gone *bump*.

The sun had set for the last time. It lay forlornly on the horizon, its brilliant, fiery glow slowly fading away. Wisps of smoke drifted into the air.

Emerging from the silent crowd, the Mage approached the fallen star, his ancient, wrinkled face revealing no emotion at all. The priest stirred, sensing that this was a momentous occasion of some sort, but not entirely sure which sort, specifically. He stayed where he was. The Mage knelt carefully beside the sun, sweeping his robes behind his back to keep from singeing the cloth.

Someone gasped as he reached out with one leathery palm to touch the sun's surface. But it seemed that he needn't have worried about singeing his robes; it was cool to the touch. A few people moved towards the sun. The initial, uncomprehending stupor was quickly wearing off.

"What is it?" someone had to ask. Nobody deigned to answer.

"The poor dear," said the bride, placing a hand across her mouth. Then the hush was broken, and everyone was talking at once, calling out various suggestions and questions.

"Quiet!" the Mage commanded. They fell silent once more. He placed his ear against the sun's mottled black surface. He stayed like that for over a minute, just listening. The others waited expectantly, and at long last he spoke.

"It's dead."

A collective gasp rose up.

"What do you mean, exactly," said the groom, "by 'it's dead'?"

"But it *can't* be!" cried the bride. "Maybe it's just sleeping."

"It's dead," the Mage repeated. He stood, uttering a long sigh as he forced his weary joints into submission.

"We must bury it, then," said the groom. "It's the decent thing to do, even if it did pick a party to die at." There were nods all around, and at least one mutter of '*dreadfully rude, wasn't it?*'

A pair of shovels were soon procured, and the men took turns digging a round grave for the fallen sun. At last it was done, and the sun fell into the hole with a thump that made them all cringe. As they shoveled the dirt back in, the priest performed a brief burial ceremony.

"*Amen*," said the group. They returned to their tables in a solemn line. The moon was almost full tonight; between it and the bug torches there was enough light to see by.

"All's well that ends well," said the best man. "That's what I say. Our dear friend Sol went out the way he would have wanted to. To the sun!"

"To the sun!" the group cheered.

"And now…to the happy couple, I propose a toast." He held his wine glass aloft. "To bride and groom!"

"*To bride and groom!*"

Uktena's Heirs

By A.M. Stickel

The ground shuddered like an old woman warding off the chill of a winter morning, and then all was still. This, and the wailing of a few wakened babies, roused Agwara of the Dwelven from his tent. Grabbing his battle-axe in one hand, his spear in the other, he rushed out naked. He noted with approval that his neighbors, though groggy as he from their midday rest, were likewise armed and ready. The stocky chieftain beckoned them to him, but continued to look around warily. Wives and daughters, as was proper, had remained in the stifling tents, holding children to them and hushing them to silence.

"To the well!" he ordered. "Uktena of the Depths has blessed us with a sign." He smiled, showing pointed teeth, and licked the sharp metal edge of his axe.

Their copper skin burnished by the sun that beat down on their refuge, the men and boys gathered around Agwara near the well. Behind them, many black-and-white striped tents flapped in the hot breeze. Overhead, dark wings of desert condors, disturbed from their perches above the well, briefly dimmed the glare.

Agwara lifted his mighty arms and threw back his head with its glorious red mane. The men nodded and murmured in assent as he spoke. "As soon as my brother, Letme, returns from spying on Kryston, we will march on the city. Their forest will fall to our axes. Our spears will drink the blood of our former masters. We will free our own so long enslaved by them. Lord Uktena's Abyss will receive a gift of Kryston bones."

As if agreeing with Agwara, the ground shuddered again, this time like a woman in labor. Soon, strident ululations rose and fell on the desert air, the women responding to deep-throated male war chants. The men raised their spears to salute their leader. Sure that victory and sweet vengeance was at hand, Agwara saluted his followers, raising his spear toward them. Then, grinning, he licked his axe again, to show how he would do likewise with the blood of slain Krystons.

High in a pine-scented palace bedchamber, the treacherous Letme lay tangled in the ebon tresses and silken rainbow gown of Memceptim, Ruler of Kryston. "I will always be your slave, Lady," said he, kissing her delicate golden hand and gazing into her midnight eyes, "Never free me."

"My beloved double spy, I must free you briefly," said she, her cool hand softly stroking his cheek and playing with his heavy red braid, "since it is time for you to lead your bloodthirsty brother into our trap. The mines beneath our forests have need of more workers. We of Kryston are the true children of Lord Uktena, and the Dwelven, with one exception, merely his tools."

The future Lord of Kryston bowed his handsome head in acquiescence, and reluctantly rose from the couch to do his Lady's bidding.

In the Linear Abyss, Uktena the Deathless uncoiled and laughed, shaking the ground.

Survey: The Lamp Post Awards

The staff at Deep Magic has decided to create a "best of Deep Magic" award. Over the last year, we have brought you some of the best and brightest stories, articles, and artwork available in the world. We would like to recognize these authors and artists by picking one from each category as being the "best" for the year. After doing a little research and discussing it as a staff, we have decided to name this prestigious award: The Lamp Post Awards.

We decided to pay homage once again to C.S. Lewis and his influence on our view of fantasy and science fiction. But it also has connotations beyond the worlds that Lewis created. Over the last year, Deep Magic has been a beacon drawing in new, formerly unrecognized talent.

We need you, our readers, to vote on the finalists. Here is how the process works. The editorial staff recommended our favorite stories in each category: Fantasy Fiction stories, Science Fiction stories, Articles, and Best Artwork. We would like you to visit our poll page on the website and cast your vote for your favorite pieces. You have all summer to do so - voting ends on August 15. That will give you some time to read any stories you may have missed. All of these represent the best that Deep Magic has offered over the last year. Now it is time to pick the best of the best.

The winner in each category will receive the prestigious Lamp Post Award. We'll keep it a secret what that will be until the winners are announced in our September issue.

Feel free to use the Message Board to try and win other readers to your way of thinking. We're sure the authors and artists would enjoy the feedback too.

Fantasy Short Story

Birth Of a Hero by Steve Westcott (Feb 2003)
Bliss: A Fairy Tale by Steven Richards (Nov 2002)
Disappearing by Lori Erickson (Oct 2002)
Jase's Challenge by Clover Autrey (Mar 2003)
Maia by JT Slane (Oct 2002)
Mortal Amusement by Brendon Taylor (Sep 2002)
Skygrave by Margo Lerwill (Apr 2003)
Slaying the Dragon by M. Thomas (Aug 2002)
The King of Wolvmeadow by Peter Dahl (Jun 2002)

SciFi short story

A Taste Of Earth by Darrell Newton (May 2003)
Andie and I by Ryan Peterson (Jul 2002)
Cinder-Relic by Melva Gifford (Dec 2002)
Kylaan Zn by Ian Fulton Roberts (Nov 2002)
Oranges and Lemons by Ays Marin (Mar 2003)
Prometheus' Tears by Mark Reeder (Feb 2003)
Refuge by Reuben Fox (Jun 2002)
What Power In a Word? by Alexander R. Brown (Aug 2002)

Artist

Christophe Vacher "The Source" (Jun 2002)
Ciruelo Cabral "Cadmo" (Nov 2002)
Donato Giancola "Dragonflight" (Dec 2002)
Geoff Taylor "Sacred Seven" (Apr 2003)
Jonathon Earl Bowser "A Dark Knight" (June2002)
Kinuko Craft "Scent of Magic" (Feb 2003)
Les Edwards "The List of Seven" (Jan 2003)
Ted Nasmith "Luthien" (May 2003)

Article

A Tale Told By An Idiot by Gary Allen
Fantasy and Cliches by Robin Hobb
Harry Potter Goes to Court by Brendon Taylor
Notes About the Sword by M. Thomas
On Writing by Rob Sawyer
Tale Of a Talent Gone Good by Charles Finlay
The Economics Of Being a Fantasy Author by Jeff Wheeler
Why Do People Read Fiction? by David Farland

Go to the website and vote!

Our poll sponsored by csPoller. They provided us a great poll script, so please go to their site and check out their great scripts. They offer a wide selection of quality cgi-scripts, and their support is fantastic.

The Dream-Magic
By Vera Searles

The Dream-Magic wrapped itself into a ball, and pushed through the opening to the other side. It rolled across Seldra's eyelids, so that she would dream Real.

Seldra knew what was happening, for the Dream-Magic spoke to her in many voices from the past and from the future. She sat in her room in the cottage, listening. Sometimes she heard a silver wolf, howling from the snowy mountaintop, his lips forming ice-words. Sometimes it was a naked fur-man, beating a drum made from the skin of human heads. And yet again it might be a metal man, with a face hard and gray, who spoke in points and slashes, which Seldra understood was from the far beyond.

Seldra's father and mother and brothers and sisters came and went with the ebbing of the days and nights, but Seldra could not accompany them, for her mission was to guard the Dream-Magic. The family toiled in the fields, and Seldra watched them from her small window.

"I am eighteen," she said to the Dream-Magic. "Let me go with my brothers and sisters to smell the hay, to touch the clover, and to feel the sunshine on my skin."

"Your father has no daughter younger than you to guard the opening," the Dream-Magic said.

Seldra's forehead creased down the middle. "I will not stay here forever!" she cried. "It is not fair!"

"Entry into your thatched cottage is simple," the Dream-Magic said. "When your family is away in the fields, who will guard the place for me to come through? Suppose it is seized by a demon who will pour all my magic into a bottle for his own use? Or suppose a beggar falls through and stuffs the magic into his pockets to sell? But worst of all – if Avion, the magic-stealer comes through – all my dream-magic could be lost forever!"

I also want to see what you have seen, Dream–Magic – what is past and what is yet to come.

Seldra knew this to be true. Avion was the Dream Weaver's daughter, and her father was always after the magic to make his dreams real. Three times in the past year Avion tried to steal the Dream-Magic, but Seldra guarded the opening with her own life.

Avion had climbed in through the window, thinking Seldra was asleep, but Seldra never slept unless the Dream-Magic was safely with her. As soon as Avion appeared, Seldra had thrust her fist into the opening in the corner near her cot, and even though Avion pulled and scratched and bit, Seldra's fist remained. "I will be back," Avion had threatened. "Next time – I will bring a weapon."

Now the Dream-Magic asked, "Do you recall the look on Avion's face?"

Seldra remembered. It was pure hatred. Avion would kill if there were no other way to remove Seldra's fist from the opening.

"But it's not fair," Seldra repeated. She looked out at the fields where the tall grasses rippled in the spring breeze, and her parents trudged back and forth, swinging their scythes. "I want to be out there, with them!" She gestured with an emphatic nod of her head, which made her raven-silk hair fall across her face. She pushed it back, saying, "I also want to see what you have seen, Dream-Magic – what is past and what is yet to come."

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Confessions of a 150-Foot Tall Grasshopper

By William I. Lengeman III

No one knows me, but that's not surprising. No one ever tried to get to know me. I'm sure they never even considered that it was a possibility. I wish things could have turned out differently. I have so much to offer and now I'll never get the chance.

I never meant to hurt anyone. I really didn't. I wish I could tell them, but there's no way. Even if we could communicate, they wouldn't want to hear it.

The old me wouldn't have cared, but that's no longer who I am. You could easily have figured that out by looking at me, but it goes much deeper than that. Long before the size thing happened, I had changed in much more dramatic ways.

I remember the day I woke up – for lack of a better term. Everything before that is hazy. I don't know what experiments Dr. Ringflauer was doing, but at some point I began to absorb – good a word as any – mental emanations from other creatures. That meant Ringflauer, for the most part, since he was around the most.

I remember an anecdote I absorbed from him – a group of men, who lived their entire lives in a cave, were amazed when they were released into the great and wondrous world beyond.

If it had stopped there, I might have been happy. But it didn't. Ringflauer kept experimenting – not realizing what had happened. I began to grow, slowly at first, and then more rapidly.

How could they know I didn't mean to destroy the city, to kill those people? How could they know that the rapid changes that came over me had clouded my mind? How could they know that it wasn't the real me?

I often regretted leaving, but it didn't matter. Ringflauer would have been content to study me forever and I truly believe he meant me no harm, but if I hadn't left, the time would have come when he could no longer keep his secret.

My days are numbered. What a sad thing that is. I have learned to love this world. I would love to spend the rest of my days strolling by the sea, marveling at the glorious sunsets and luxuriating in the warm salty breezes.

But it is not to be. The armies will not stop until I am gone. They could do nothing else. How could they know I didn't mean to destroy the city, to kill those people? How could they know that the rapid changes that came over me had clouded my mind? How could they know that it wasn't the real me?

The tanks and artillery batteries are on the other side of the hill. It won't be long. I sense Ringflauer's presence, stronger than the others. He intercedes for me – in the name of science and the pursuit of knowledge. I know his pleas will surely fall on deaf ears.

The ground rumbles and the air is rent asunder by booming concussions. I will stand to face

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New York Field Trip (part 1)
From the 24th Floor at Bantam Dell
By Jeff Wheeler

I have a good day job. A great job. I study labor markets all over the world for Intel Corporation. In May of this year, I was invited to give a speech at Columbia University in Manhattan on the subject. Prior to the invitation, I had been working to get an interview with the VP of marketing at Bantam Dell. (Do the names Robin Hobb or George R.R. Martin ring a bell? That's Bantam Dell, one of the many divisions of Random House.) Once I learned I would be in New York, I suggested that we meet in person to conduct the interview. The reply went beyond my wildest expectations. How about meeting the entire editorial staff as well, and have a question and answer session?

How many ways can you spell lucky?

For those readers who don't really care how a publishing company works, I'll throw you a bone first before you stop reading, just to give you an idea of how cool this experience was. Before I left the 24th Floor of the Random House building on Broadway, I was asked to carry away as many books as I wanted – some of which are upcoming publications. On my flight home, I started reading the galley proof of Sarah Ash's *The Lord of Snow and Shadows*. You'll have to wait until it is published to see a copy for yourself. But I will say that the cover art (which I also received) is gorgeous.

Though the original intent of my visit to the Random House building was to talk to the marketing department at Bantam Dell, it became much more than that.

What's a galley proof? Why did they give away all those books to you for free? Keep reading then. I'll tell you.

Before I start sharing all the sordid details, it would be interesting to mention a little bit about the size of the publishing industry as a whole. The lion's share of the industry, the big publishers like Random House, is a market worth about 30 billion dollars. The fantasy genre is just a subset of this, and probably a small one –unless you count J.K. Rowling. There are also about 70,000 small publishers in the U.S. alone, and combined they add another 10 billion dollars to the equation. So it is a 40 billion dollar industry, give or take a billion or two, with all the big players and teeny players boxing for your reading dollar.

Now, let me put this in perspective. The company I work for is the largest semiconductor company in the world. By ourselves, we pull in around 30 billion dollars a year in revenue. So a company like Intel draws in about as much revenue as all the publishing companies combined. But I'm not done giving you a perspective yet. The company Wal-Mart had revenues of 245 billion dollars in the last year. Eight times more than Intel.

So the publishing industry is relatively small in the big scheme of things. It is an established industry – an industry that existed before William Caxton started publishing books on a printing press at Westminster Abbey in the 15th century. Publishing is an industry and a business. Let me say it

again in case you tried to skip ahead. Publishing is a business.

And it is a business that fascinates me. It should; I'm part of it.

Though the original intent of my visit to the Random House building was to talk to the marketing department at Bantam Dell, it became much more than that. I had the honor of meeting the entire staff, so it opened up the possibility of asking other questions. I want to spend some time talking about some of the business of the industry – how it works and what makes it tick. Then I'll write a separate article focusing on the marketing of new books – which is a topic near and dear to my heart.

Because publishing is a business, I wanted to know how Bantam Dell fared in the battlefield of publishing. They have several best-selling authors on board now. In fact, Bantam Dell is one of the most profitably run operations within Random House – that gives them some well-deserved bragging rights, considering Del Rey Books is also part of Random House.

I asked if the Lord of the Rings movies were affecting their sales volumes in any way. Not really. Of course the success of the movies has been shunting boatloads of cash to Tolkien's estate, but so far it has not "raised the tide" for the fantasy industry as a whole. Fantasy fiction is still loved by genre addicts – not the mainstream.

I then asked about fresh authors with new voices. Most publishing companies (especially in the fantasy and science fiction genres) expect an author to find an agent to represent their manuscript. Bantam Dell is one of the few that still accepts manuscripts from authors without an agent. Now before you get too excited and decide to rush your latest sword and sorcery novel to the post office outbound to New York, the editors wanted me to share some advice with you. Seeing how it comes from the unicorn's mouth, it might be worthwhile to pay attention.

Imagine, for a moment, that you worked in a skyscraper in Manhattan. I don't, so let me paint the picture for you. From their offices on the 24th floor you can see a river, some cargo cranes, and other massive buildings fighting to dominate the skyline like titans. Bantam Dell has a staff of four, really. Three editors and the marketing VP. That's it. The manuscripts come in ebbs and flows. Sometimes they get a lot, and have to wade through several each week. Other times the workload is lighter. Sometimes they select many authors to publish. Sometimes few. It's a constant flow, but the quality and volume changes. It's also a job – like mine. There were cubicles that were the same size as mine, messy desks like mine, bookshelves stacked with fantasy books like…well, not exactly like mine.

Imagine a few overanxious authors who want their manuscript to be accepted. Some hunt down the phone number for Random House and they start calling…and calling…and calling. The editors call these types "pesky flies." Many authors don't even bother to find out the submission guidelines prior to submitting. Some authors hear that being "clever" or "cute" with a query letter will help them be noticed. The staff joked with me that they have received manuscripts on colored paper, query letters stuffed in a bottle, all sorts of craziness. Do you think cute and clever works? Sure enough, it works its way right into the garbage. With all the global turmoil, do you think publishers aren't a little nervous about what will show up in the mail? If it rattles loose, or hisses like sand, they won't even open it. Anthrax scares seem to be a riot in New York.

Those were some don'ts. Now for some practical words of advice from the folks who actually do the selecting and publishing. First, try to plug in the common sense that may have jarred loose somewhere along the road to finishing your manuscript. Would you want to be nagged by a stranger while you are at work? Neither do editors. It is their job to consider the manuscripts that come in. They do this by reading them. They may not like yours. Nagging them won't make them like it any more. Quite the contrary. I got the impression that if the writing is strong, and the plot convincing,

then they will tend to read further and start to seriously consider the manuscript. But if you cannot hook their interest within the first few pages or chapters, don't expect them to keep plowing through. This is why, in my opinion, every author who wants to make it into the industry needs to have some open and honest feedback from disinterested parties. Writing workshops are the best way to get this. Not a spouse, not a friend from college, but from complete strangers. You really won't know how well – or poorly – you write until a stranger tells you. A publishing company is not a writing workshop. They should not be the first human beings to read your genius.

I'm not done with the advice yet. The next point is to follow instructions. If you don't know a publishing company's submission guidelines, then research them and find out. Most of the guidelines are posted on their website, but there are other sources as well. You would be amazed at the kinds of submissions we get at Deep Magic. Many of them truly baffle us. I felt a sympathetic chord struck when I talked about this with the folks at Bantam Dell. Most publishers get plenty of spam e-mail. Loads of it. They do not want query letters by e-mail unless they state it specifically. So don't bother sending it otherwise. Anne Groell, the Editorial Director at Spectra, told me that she deletes e-mail queries without opening them. Besides, e-mail carries viruses too.

The next bit of advice is a little difficult concept for authors. Do your homework. Not all publishers publish the same kind of fiction. If you know a little bit about the editor you submit to, it improves your chance of being noticed and rising above the stack. Anne mentioned that some query letters are better than others, especially if the submitting author states something like: "You've been a good champion for works by XXX and YYY author, and my manuscript has similar themes." If you know the personal preferences of the editor, you stand a better chance positioning your novel at that publishing company. This might mean doing a little Googling on the internet to find out more about the editorial staff at a publishing company, and seeing how you can tie your query letter to appeal to them directly. Speaking for Deep Magic again, I can tell you it makes a difference with us as well.

Speaking about query letters, it reminded me of something. The staff teased and joked about the variety of query letters they receive. Some are written from the point of view of a character in the story. Some come across as being very arrogant or overbearing. Their advice: don't be cute. Keep it simple. Don't try to impress them. Let your writing do that. Think about how your approach would work on a normal person. If the writing is good, they will keep reading it. If not, it doesn't matter what font you used. Chocolates and bribes don't work either – but then, of course they would say that, right?

There's enough on advice for now. I'll share some more when we get the topic of marketing in the next article.

I mentioned at the beginning that publishing is a business. Hope you haven't forgotten that yet. As such, it needs to run like a business. A question I brought to the table was: "What drives demand? Readers wanting new authors, or established authors making their fans happy?" The answer was difficult to give, kind of a "which came first, the chicken or the egg?" Retailers (the bookstores) try to focus on brand-names in all the categories, including fantasy fiction. J.K. Rowling sells. That means that the publisher must constantly push key authors as their "brand names" to the bookstores, or they risk diminishing sales. Not every author can be positioned as a brand name. A publisher would lose credibility if they said every author was better than Tolkien. Yet by pushing a new name now and then, new brand names are established. Granted, not every author rises to the fame and popularity of Robin Hobb. In fact, I have a funny story about her for the next article. Remind me to tell you about how they positioned her Farseer series.

Some authors just do not generate the positive press and attract enough of a readership to sustain volume sales. In the industry, this is called "sell through." A book is judged to be successful

by the publisher if they can achieve 80% (or greater) sell through on the initial printing. That means if they run 40,000 copies of a hardcover novel, success means selling 32,000 in a relatively short time. But there is some wiggle room here. What about a first-time author that no one has ever read before? A 50% sell through could be considered good.

Sometimes an author just does not sell. I asked what they did with the remaining inventory. Did they hit the used book market? Put it on the discount rack at Barnes & Noble? The answer surprised me. It is less expensive to scrap the books than to try and sell them, even at an extreme discount. The cost of shipping the books out of the warehouse could be more than the value of scrapping the lot. I asked how long they waited before scrapping inventory, and it does take several years of abysmal sales before they'll liquidate inventory like this. You never know when a sleeper hit may come.

I had another big realization before leaving the 24th floor. Because publishing is a business, there is a never-ending cycle of acquiring new books. Some authors fade away and stop writing as aggressively, new authors come along and take the genre to new Himalayas. Publishers are always dealing with books. There are three to four that went on sale in the last month. Another five to ten on sale right now. Up to twenty books that will go on sale in the next month, or two months, or three. And they plan offerings out even as far as six months in advance. The authors hitting the bookstands now hit the editors' desks a year ago. It is a constant churn of material.

I asked the staff what measures they took to prevent making mistakes. Nothing is ever guaranteed, of course. Often the entire staff is excited about an author, but the public shuns the new release. Bouncing manuscripts off each other tends to be the safest bet. If all three of the editors do not like an offering, then it never sees the light of an offset press. But other editors may be passionate about a piece. There can often be disputes about the cover art too. Everyone has a boss in this business. I was told: "If you walk by an office and see someone's arms flapping and hear them behind the door, you know it's an editor defending the cover layout."

The primary decision making factor though, is a gut feeling. This isn't surprising in a world where the winners and the losers can't be determined by writing quality alone. There are no easy formulas for success, no spells that will vindicate with absolute certainty. The engine is driven by new manuscripts that continue to arrive – hopefully without any anthrax spores disguised as confetti.

Before I left, I asked the folks at Bantam Dell about the competition out there. Not the Del Reys and Tors, but the small presses – the 70,000 in the United States that divert some of the readership revenue away from the big publishing houses. I saw some wry smiles, some knowing looks exchanged. "We're watching them," they told me. They had recently purchased a book from a small press that only published authors who were handicapped, outcast, or were maimed women. They look at authors and artists coming out of Australia and Russia, always keeping their eyes open for new talent wherever they may find it.

And just in case they're reading this article: I truly enjoyed our morning together in May on the 24th floor…Anne, Betsy, Juliet, and Richard.

It was more fun than my speech at Columbia.

Some of you might now be realizing that I never answered the question about galley proofs and free copies. I will – in my next article. It's about the marketing of fantasy books.

The End

Landmoor

Deep Magic and Amberlin Books are proud to present their debut novel:

LANDMOOR
By Jeff Wheeler

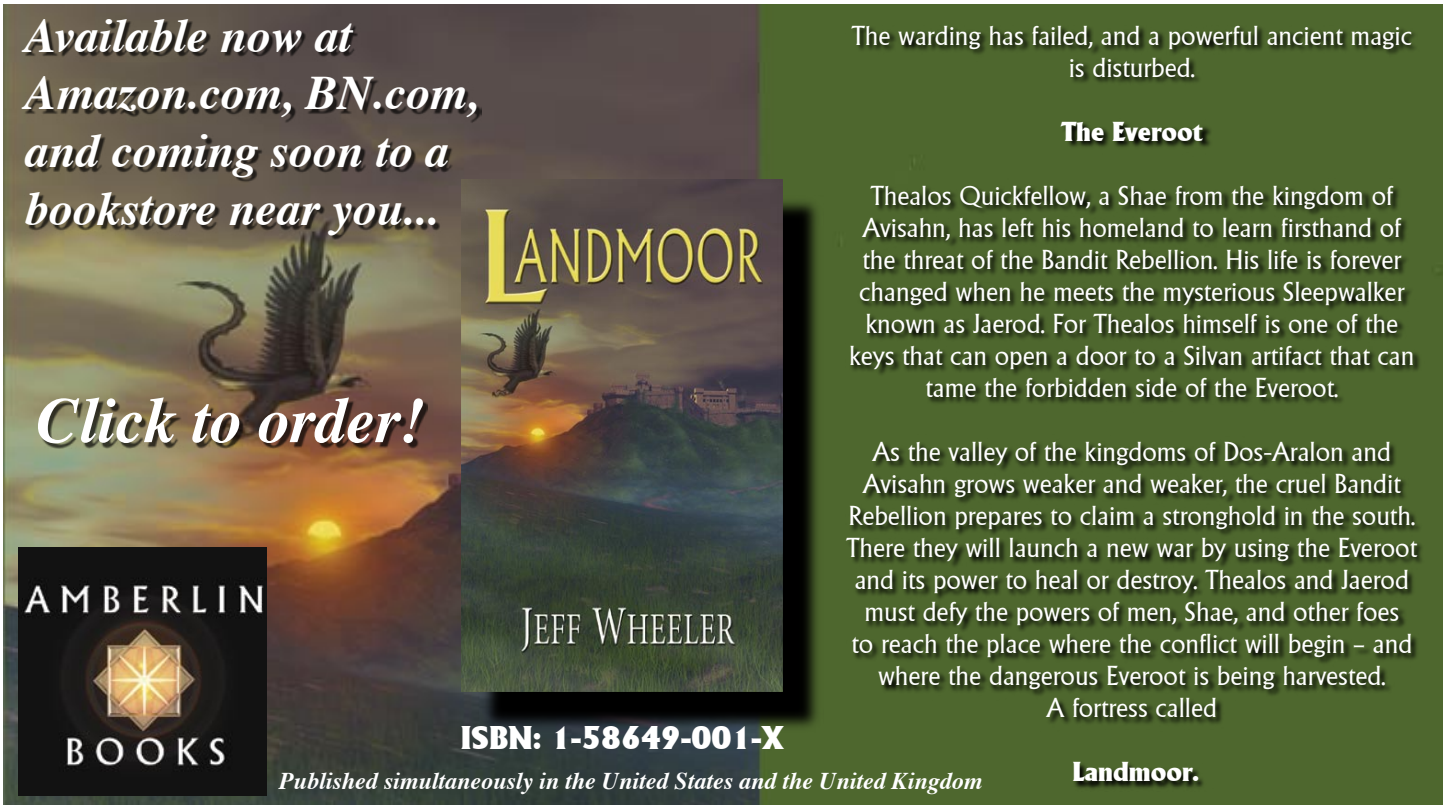
The serialized novel that took you to a new world of magic and adventure is now available! Return to the lands of the Everoot with Thealos Quickfellow and Jaerod, and prepare yourself for the upcoming sequel by purchasing a copy of *Landmoor* to add to your fantasy collection.

When we started Deep Magic over a year ago, we created a niche on the internet that will always remain "a safe place for minds to wander." Our goal at Deep Magic is to continue to bring you the best and the brightest voices in fantasy and science fiction--luminaries like Robin Hobb and Cecilia Dart-Thornton, as well as tomorrow's new authors.

Your purchase of *Landmoor*, and the other novels to follow, will directly help fund payment for the fiction authors and artists of Deep Magic. (Our editorial work and articles are generously donated by staff and Deep Magic enthusiasts.) Buy a copy for yourself. Buy one for a friend or family member, or a budding young fantasy enthusiast you may know. You can be sure they won't run into anything objectionable there. Buy a copy for your local library, or school. Ask your local bookstore to stock *Landmoor*, so that others who will enjoy the book will see it.

But most importantly, enjoy it yourself and pass on word of it to others. Your readership has already contributed to a year of success. Your continued support and recommendations of Deep Magic will ensure many more to come. So, enjoy the much-anticipated release of *Landmoor*, and know that, as always, you have our most sincere thanks for making Deep Magic the success it is.

Sincerely,
The Deep Magic Editors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LANDMOOR
JEFF WHEELER
AMBERLIN BOOKS
ISBN: 1-58649-001-X
Published simultaneously in the United States and the United Kingdom
The warding has failed, and a powerful ancient magic is disturbed.
The Everoot
Thealos Quickfellow, a Shae from the kingdom of Avisahn, has left his homeland to learn firsthand of the threat of the Bandit Rebellion. His life is forever changed when he meets the mysterious Sleepwalker known as Jaerod. For Thealos himself is one of the keys that can open a door to a Silvan artifact that can tame the forbidden side of the Everoot.
As the valley of the kingdoms of Dos-Aralon and Avisahn grows weaker and weaker, the cruel Bandit Rebellion prepares to claim a stronghold in the south. There they will launch a new war by using the Everoot and its power to heal or destroy. Thealos and Jaerod must defy the powers of men, Shae, and other foes to reach the place where the conflict will begin – and where the dangerous Everoot is being harvested.
A fortress called
Landmoor.

Flames of a Dove
By Najla Ann Al-Doori

This is a dreadful place to die, Robert Tarlton thought of the dilapidated barn serving as a medical shelter. Its creaking walls reeked with the damp smell of horse and pig. At least it's a haven far from the agonies of a battlefield.

Several tall, old oak trees surrounded the barn. A rain-swollen creek nearby twisted its way through the woodlands and out onto a grassy meadow beyond.

Wounded soldiers clad in Union blue crowded inside the makeshift hospital. Weary, dirty and unshaven, they were brought here to have broken limbs set and bandaged, or wounds probed and dressed, or limbs amputated, or to fight the debilitating fevers of disease, or to die.

He felt for those strewn on the makeshift beds; rough blankets thrown over pine boughs spread out on the hardened dirt floor. A lucky few got real cots. A handful propped themselves with coarse crutches against an empty patch of a battered wall, too feeble or having lost a leg, unable to stand alone. Despair shrouded the faces of most.

At twenty-three, his first horrors of war medicine pierced his spine with clammy chills. He never imagined his practice would lead to such a dismal turn.

"You're the first surgeon they've seen," remarked one of the orderlies.

"Yes, I'm aware of that." Robert sympathized and imagined how, on the battlefront, they got their injuries. It shocked him that so many still wore the blood soaked dressings received from a few days before. Some remained silent, others divulged in graphic accounts of battle. Moans of misery escaped from a few.

At twenty-three, his first horrors of war medicine pierced his spine with clammy chills. He never imagined his practice would lead to such a dismal turn.

Outside, heavy rain pounded and streaks of lightening slashed the dark, clouded sky casting a foreboding gloom over the wounded and sick. Sharp thunder crashed in the distance.

Startled screams of pain and terror came from a far corner of the barn. He cringed.

"Oh, Lordy, Lordy," shrieked a young boy. "God the Almighty, have mercy on me." Tears trickled down his cheeks. He looked no more than thirteen, and frightened. His body lay prostrate on a table better known among the soldiers as the butcher's block.

Robert stepped over and gazed upon the wretched youth, bleeding and mutilated from the firing of a Confederate cannon. It was the left leg. The hideous black of putrid gangrene was already settled in below the knee. He shuddered, and knew what he had to do.

"It'll be quick," he assured the boy.

Robert called out to two medical attendants, but not before checking his breast pocket for some sheets of poetry he placed there earlier that morning, to read after his rounds. The beauty of prose was always a comfort to him.

At the sight of the aids, the boy began thrashing his arms and good leg. "No, Oh Lordy, not

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No Unread Pages
By Rebekah Jensen

She was always called a bookworm, but she never minded. If the name was meant to be an insult, she was unaware of it. Probably because she didn't stop reading long enough to notice her taunters' faces.

She used to inhale books, like breathing, four, maybe five, books a day. Books on any subject, fiction or fact, picture books to scholarly journals. At school, she would read quickly, furtively, between glances from the teacher ("Are you paying attention, young lady?"), and the recess bell. After school, in the blissful space between school and sleep, she would curl up on her favorite chair and savor each word. During the baking Nevada summers she would lie by the pool, but she found her cooling in books on the Arctic and outer space.

In describing her, people would be hard pressed to say whether she was pretty or plain. If asked, she wouldn't have been able to answer what color her eyes were, though she valued them greatly behind their thick lenses. Her mother just sighed, told her she was missing her childhood, and tended the multiple cuts and bruises she acquired by trying to read as she walked. All through her days and nights until she finished high school she devoured books on cryptography, and lustful Irishmen, and obscure languages, and griffins, and anything else.

Closing her eyes and placing both hands on the pile, she willed herself to read, to understand, to know the books. Her hands began to tingle and she looked down in surprise.

Schoolwork was easy for her, and it was not until she got into college that she really needed to concentrate on her studies. Difficult classes, along with a new home and roommate, and the intoxicating nearness of the school's world-renowned library, began to complicate her life.

The ivy-covered library seemed to be around every corner, its reading room peaceful and comfortable. There no one tried to get her to talk and "be social," just the quiet scratching of pens and turning of pages. Her schoolwork would lie forgotten in her backpack on the floor as she consumed whole shelves of fresh subjects. But she couldn't go there as often as she wished. She would sometimes take an out-of-the-way route to classes to avoid walking by its alluring doors.

For the first time in her life, she found herself with not enough time to read.

One hectic week she spent far too many hours reading up on a subject that had seized her interest, and failed to prepare for an important sociology exam. The night before, and into the early hours of the next morning, she crammed desperately, opening some of her sociology texts for the first time. Towards dawn, she began to despair of even passing the exam. Blearily, she stared at the pile of books before her. Not a little drunk from sleeplessness and shaky from caffeine, an odd compulsion came to her. Closing her eyes and placing both hands on the pile, she willed herself to read, to understand, to know the books. Her hands began to tingle and she looked down in surprise.

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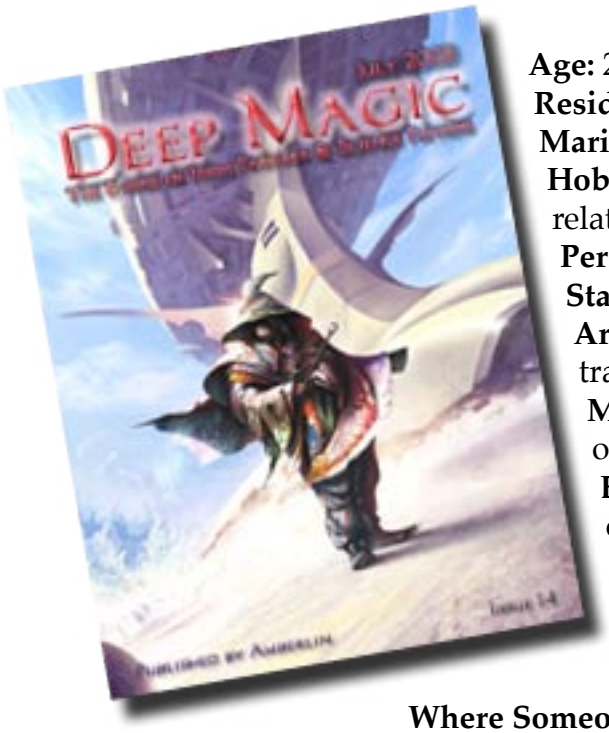
Feature Artist
Leonid Kozienko



Age: 23
Residence: Irkutsk, Russia
Marital Status: Single
Hobbies: Mostly drawing and painting... just everything related to art.
Personal Quote: "Never give up."
Started Painting In: Mid 1990's
Artist Most Inspired By: I'm inspired by many artists, both traditional and digital.
Media You Work In: Mostly digital, but I still pick up a pen or pencil and paper.
Educational/Training Background: I have a technical degree and studied at art school for a while. I have had very little art education compared to other artists, so I'm still learning.
Where Your Work Has Been Published or Displayed: Videogames, various magazines and online resources.
Where Someone Can Buy Your Art or Contact You Professionally: Check out my website or email me: 5dlab@irk.ru.
Website URL: http://www.leoarts.irk.ru

Q: How did you come to be an artist?
A: I started drawing when I was around two years old, I think. My mom, being a programmer, always had these sheets of paper with printed code around, so I always drew something on them. I still have some of those drawings somewhere... Art is a big part of my life and I just can't live without it.

Q: How would you describe your work?
A: I'm trying to put emotions, impressions and soul into my paintings. I also tend to use more bright and vivid colors these days.

Feature Artist: Leonid Kosienko

Q: Where do you find your inspiration?
A: Reality around me is a great source of inspiration! Life is full of interesting things, so you just need keep your eyes open.

Q: What inspired this cover? "Slider" (Tell us its story)
A: Okay, lets talk about Slider. I did this image for the online anime contest featured by manga.ru website. The contest's theme was a character in an alien world. At this moment I was really inspired by Final Fantasy X concept art (I never played the game, though) and decided to create something unusual... something bright and colorful but realistic enough. So I came up with that exotic character and vehicle. I've seen contest entries before, and I was really excited to break out that classic anime look. I only placed 3rd at the contest but received tremendous response from all over the world!

Q: What do you consider your influences?
A: Probably other artists' works and animations are my influences.

Q: What has been your greatest success in your artistic career?
A: Hmm... it's hard to speak about any success; I'm still learning, polishing my skills and the road goes over on and on.

Q: What trends are you seeing in the Sci-Fi/Fantasy genre?
A: Nowadays the usage of digital art and illustration are amazing. You can do anything you can imagine. On the negative side, it seems like those artists (especially young ones) have little or no training and ignore old masters and traditional painters' experience.

Giaglo's World
By Adrienne Allmann

The thief should have been here by now. Mary paced the hardwood floors of her city loft, her hands clasped behind her back. She glanced up at the antique clock on the wall, then peered out the window to see if she could catch a glimpse of his car pulling up in front of the building. Water ran in streams down the large glass windows, and the rain pounded the empty street below. Where was he?

She sighed and went to the kitchen for a cup of tea. Maybe his flight back to the U.S. had been delayed, or he'd been caught up at customs. He was a citizen. Mary couldn't imagine that he'd have too much trouble passing through security. Unless the customs agents had found the paintings...

No, impossible. Mary shook her head, her black curls bouncing up and down around her pale cheeks. The thief – her cousin Ed, twice removed on her father's side - was always very careful. She had hired him two times previously to obtain artwork for her, and both jobs had been problem-free. Something as minor as a custom's check shouldn't be a problem for Ed, but she would worry until he arrived.

The only paintings Mary really cared about were the Giaglos, having first fallen in love with them the summer she turned twelve.

When the tea was done, she poured some into her monogrammed coffee mug, adding a spoonful of sugar. Her heels clicked on the bare floors, echoing throughout the loft as she carried the steaming cup into her office, casting another glance over her shoulder at the clock as she passed.

Mary set the cup down on the heavy oak desk, careful to use a coaster. The sturdy desk had been an inheritance from her late father, and to Mary it was the one thing that most symbolized Father's immense political and financial power. She could still picture him sitting behind it, the top button of his shirt undone, tie loosened, a phone to one ear while he tapped away on the computer in front of him. She loved curling up on the sofa in Father's study while he worked, reading a book, or just sitting and listening to him talking on the phone, "Jenson, I told you not to send that paperwork to the Congressman until I had a chance to talk to him first! What kind of imbecile are you?" He had always allowed her to stay, as long as she promised to be very quiet and not get in his way.

Now the desk was hers. Father originally left the desk to Georgie, but Georgie had jumped at the opportunity to trade it for the Picasso. Mary didn't care much for Picasso anyway; it had been a fair trade. Father left his entire art collection to her - what was one Picasso amidst the multitude of works by Seurat, Monet, Cézanne and Gaugin?

She sat down in the heavy leather chair behind the desk and slid off her shoes, rubbing her stocking-clad toes into the plush carpeting and stretching her legs. Sampson the Cat, sprawled out in one of the leather visitor chairs, looked up at her and opened his jaw in a bored yawn.

The only paintings Mary really cared about were the Giaglos, having first fallen in love with them the summer she turned twelve. Georgie and Elizabeth had been in Europe for the summer, and Mother was off on a Caribbean cruise. Only Mary and Father had remained at the vast Connecticut estate.

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Ollie
By Gary Clinton

Ollie hated being a frog.

He hated everything about being a frog. He hated crawling around in wet grass. He hated leaping–what a stupid, undignified way to get around. Most of all, he despised eating bugs for a living. He was sure there had been some mistake, some hiccup on the karmic wheel. This just could not be right!

He had learned of a hope from the old frogs and their lore. Learned how the kiss of a beautiful human female could transform him, and it made sense. After all, he hadn't always been a frog. Once upon a time, he had been a tadpole.

If he could transform once, he reasoned, he ought to be able to do it again.

He just had to find the right woman.

His experience with human women was limited a few living in the surrounding countryside. These, he knew, would be too shy to meet his needs. His cousin, Kenney, who lived in Eugene, had told him all about city women and their free-living ways–how they were far more open to experimentation.

So, Ollie left the little pond he'd hatched in, and moved to Eugene.

Getting to Eugene wasn't hard; there were creeks and culverts everywhere. He had just kept moving west, until he found himself in Alton Baker Park on the Willamette River. He talked to everyone, all the frogs and salamanders. And he himself was the talk of the park's frogs: most of them thought he was crazy. Some believed in his quest, and except for an unromantic, cynical few–who thought he was all talk–they considered him brave.

Then came the day he saw her; his true destiny. His little heart skipped a beat, he held his breath, and stared at her for five seconds. He scrambled out of the weeds. His mind set on contact with her. She was all and everything he had hoped for–an olive-skinned, raven-haired vision of perfection.

She had just settled on the grass a few feet away.

Things were going well for him. She had seen him and was watching his progress toward her, not at all distressed by his "frogginess." Ollie became more and more excited. As he hopped closer she leaned forward, her hand open, resting on the grass. Ollie was ecstatic; it was really going to happen! He leaped into her hand; a perfumed cradle just for him. It closed around him snugly, lifting him to her face. She gazed upon him with her surprising clear blue eyes. Her lips moved, and she spoke

"Mon Dieu, mais quelles belles jambes!"

Ollie froze in terror. He tried to escape, but it was no good. She had him tight, his brief struggle was useless. He couldn't move or even raise a sound. He tried to scream–tried, over and over again:

Oh, my God! She's French!

The End

Leave a message for this story.

Secrets of the Shoeblack
By Bradley Beaulieu

Painful bites along his ankles woke Torrance from a deep sleep. He could see nothing, but cold and a dreadful stink assaulted his senses. Torrance felt something crawl over his legs, rubbing coarse fur and a wet nose over exposed skin.

Rats.

Another nibbled at his shoe. He shook his feet to get the beasts away, but found his ankles bound tightly. The rats backed away for only a moment.

What am I doing here?

Behind him, where his roped hands met slimy cement, Torrance felt chilly water flow past his fingertips. Water dripped nearby, each echo fading slowly.

For long minutes darkness continued to reign until, off to the right, a dull shine glimmered. The lantern--reflecting green off the sewer walls--bobbed and wove, growing brighter. Squeaking, as from a large number of rats, approached with the light. Despite the sounds, Torrance breathed a sigh of relief.

Torrance's first attempt at speech produced a sickening coughing fit, which awoke a deep throbbing in his forehead. Warm liquid trailed down his right temple. After working thick saliva over his throat, he tried again. "Over here!"

Another nibbled at his shoe. He shook his feet to get the beasts away, but found his ankles bound tightly. The rats backed away for only a moment.

The light continued to approach, yet did not change pace. Torrance began to make out a face--a boy, perhaps thirteen, and distantly familiar. Torrance's spirits rose with that tenuous connection.

The boy strolled along a cement lip until reaching a metal grating crossing the span between them. This he took to the lip that Torrance was on. With a start, Torrance discovered a veritable army of rats scuttling around the boy's feet. They clambered about furiously over each other, over his legs--a few even fell into the sewage below. On the boy's shoulders, two large brown ones sat high and mighty over their brethren. The boy wore a dark wool coat over a grey cotton shirt, his torn pants the same drab color. Gloveless fingers adorned both hands, and a charcoal cap sat atop his head. His bright blue eyes sat in stark contrast to the oppressing grayness of their surroundings.

Torrance squinted in unqualified confusion.

"Awake, governor?" the boy said.

"Yes. Untie me. Get me out of here."

The boy gave a quizzical look in reply.

The expression struck a chord in Torrance's paper-thin memory. "Finias. Your name is Finias, isn't it?"

The boy's eyelids shrank closer, like each statement only confused him further. He gave a curt nod before stepping close to touch Torrance's forehead. A grimy finger reached out, but a bloodied one returned. "What do you remember, then?"

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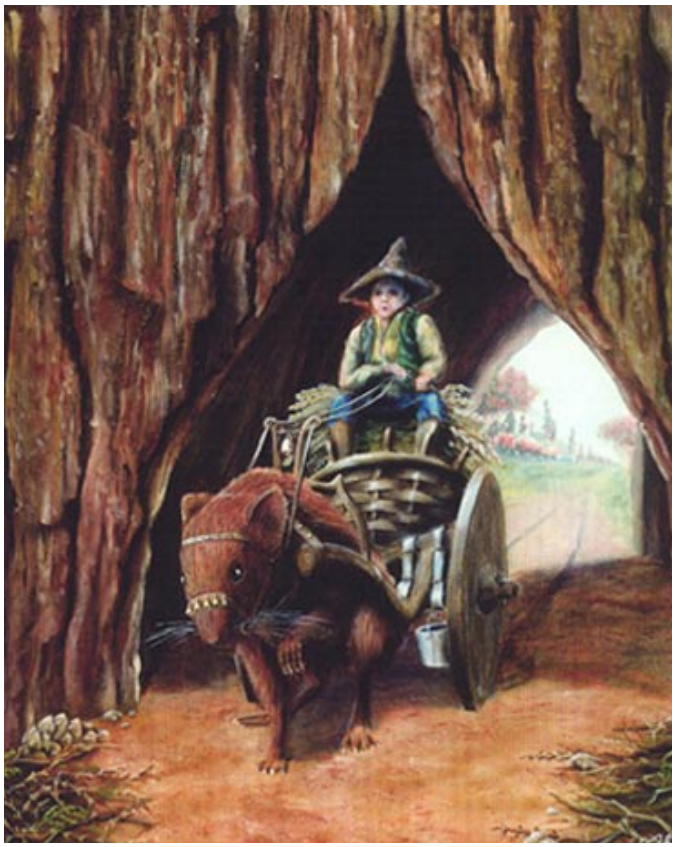
Artist Profile
John R. Gray III

Titles

Top Left: Guardian (North Bank)
Bottom Left: Guardian (South Bank)
Bottom Right: Harvest

Artist Website: http://www.asfa-art.org/gallery/gray.html



Interview with M. Thomas

Name: Melissa Thomas
Age: I am ageless and without measure. Although, the plan is to lose 10 pounds of that immeasurability by July.
Residence: Austin, TX
Marital Status: Are you with the IRS?
Children: 2 cats, 100 8th graders. Next year, 150 10th graders.
Hobbies: Teaching. I am one of the few who can say my hobby pays the bills.
Favorite Book or Author: *Where the Wild Things Are*, *Hug*, *The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam*, *Einstein's Dreams*, *P. G. Wodehouse*.
First Time You Tried to Get Something Published: I was twelve-ish.
Authors Most Inspired By: Those who keep trying.
Educational/Training Background: Belated BA in English from Huston-Tillotson college, after traveling extensively in Arizona to "find myself" for a few years. Before that, three other very nice colleges.
Published Works:
"Slaying the Dragon," and "Magic Chicken," as well as various articles in Deep Magic.
"Loose Maria" in Abyss & Apex, January 2003.
"Found Things" serialized in Deep Magic, April 2003.
"Teaching Fantasy: Overcoming the Stigma of Fluff" in Nat'l Council of Teachers of English Journal, May 2003.
"Sock Heroes" and "Beguiling Mona" forthcoming in Strange Horizons.
"The Poor Man's Wife" forthcoming in Lady Churchill's Rosebud Wristlet.
Website URL: www.found-things.com

Q: Tell us about your day job.
A: It's just a hobby, really. I teach. So do both my parents, and I come from a long line of teachers. I like it. Somehow, every year I've taught, I seem to have been given the best and the brightest students in the school. Other teachers grumble with jealousy when I tell them about it. I like keeping up with educational standards, and I like learning new things about classroom management and teaching strategies. I see too many teachers who are tired, cruel, and disillusioned. I refuse to become one of them. That's why it's my hobby. That way, I keep reminding myself I'm just doing it for fun.

Q: Tell us about the origin of your novel, Found Things.
A: Some of the characters in the novel originated years ago and kept cropping up stubbornly in character sketches and other novel attempts for nigh on two decades now. Somewhere along the way, I got interested in salt as a societal motivator, don't ask me why. I've tried to use it in several failed novels. Then, I read a recipe for cooking salmon on a thick bed of kosher salt. (I haven't tried the

recipe yet.) The salt, the recipe said, would distribute the heat more evenly, or something like that. Oddly enough, I thought about dragons. I thought, what if dragons weren't burrowing in caves to get to gold, but rather to get the salt in them? To lay on the salt, and distribute their body heat more evenly? Then what about the gold of legend? Ah, but that was to camouflage the eggs. And what if somebody found this out? And what if they brought gold to placate the dragon, so they could harvest the salt the dragon shoved out of its lair? And what if it was all a huge misinterpretation of what dragons really were? And so on, and so forth.

Q: Where do you get your ideas or inspiration for your work?
A: From family relationships, not necessarily my own. From cats, whom I find to be odd and interesting. From fantasy character clichés that can be broken apart and looked at in a new way. From signs on the highway, and bumper stickers. From legends and myths.

Q: Do you have any favorite characters?
A: I have a great emotional attachment to Missing, of course. But my favorites—because I just happened to throw them in and they became more important than I originally intended—were Aunt Orangia and Utter Riley. All the other characters were well-planned. Those two took on lives of their own.

Q: What influences have helped you become the writer you are?
A: I have the vague suspicion it was just meant to be. Cosmic forces may have aligned at some point and belched out my destiny. Writerly influences include extensive reading as a child, and good parenting that engaged my opinions and thoughts on what I was reading. They kept saying, "What are you reading? What do you think of it?"

Q: What have you been reading lately?
A: Some badly written, but earnestly felt, student short stories. (I swear I taught them about commas. I did.)

Q: How much of your time do you devote to writing?
A: A lot. Whatever's left over in the day, and an hour each morning.

Q: When you have a time where you don't think you can write another word, what is it that gets you going again?
A: One word. Wait. Wait until the time is right. Of course I sweat and worry in-between about whether or not the muse has abandoned me. But she rarely does. Sometimes, I just wait.

Q: What is your motivating factor for writing? What keeps you doing it? Do you think you will ever make a living at it? What's the trade-off?
A: I could give the organic answer here, "I write because the stories have to come out!" But truthfully, I love playing with language and ideas. They're like puzzle pieces to me. How can I justify this adjective? What's another way to describe fire that no one else has tried yet? Will I make a living off of it? Well, I'm already having to pay taxes on my meager earnings, so one would hope… The trade-off is, well honestly, the compliments and recognition are nice. The on-going challenge is a trade-off as well. But that's the sensible me. The emotional trade-off comes when people tell me about the places where they laughed. There's something fantastic in putting something on paper that

gives folks a chuckle, because you're never really sure what's going to stick…

Q: Tell us about Mervyn Peake's influence on your writing. His character names have haunting similarities to those in Found Things.
A: I read Peake years ago and was greatly impacted…though truth be told I didn't like either of the sequels so much as Titus Groan, and I only read it once. I was at an impressionable stage, I suppose. Just the right time for all that dark, wry narrative to make sense. What I found most amazing was that he created an entire novel out of elaborate character sketches. Peake introduced me to using a character's name as part of their description, but in my own defense, I'd already started doing so without really being aware of it. Cadaberous Bray was already written as a character, and with a name. He is, of course, cadaverous in nature and aspect. If you saw Esmariah for the first time you might gasp, and all the Sulks are, well, sort of sulky and petulant. Missing Sealyham came from Wodehouse, pre-Peake as well. A mis-read phrase while tired that left me thinking, "What if there was a character named Missing? How would that have come about?" She's been evolving for about 9 years, I think. Utter Riley is always utterly riled by people walking on his drive. Eleganta used to be elegant. And so on. A lot of them only I'll ever truly understand, I think.

So my Peake experience was, honestly, more like finally meeting my literary soul-mate. I had been trundling down the road toward combinations of dark and absurd for a while, with little hope for them. Then I stumbled on Peake, about 7 years before the recent resurgence of enthusiasm for him. There was a great sense of relief. "Ah ha! Someone else does this." (That was before I knew he was dead.) He was much better at it than I'll ever be, of course, but my writing path also has to diverge from him in order to evolve. I only read him the once, and never since, and doubt I ever will again. My perceptions of his work might be spoiled now by not being in the right place at the right time. But it was a very cathartic and self-actualizing experience. So the similarities are just sort of a sly, thankful wink in Peake's general direction.

Q: You use music as an interesting device in the conclusion of the story. How do you justify inserting songs like "Wee Willy Winkle" in a fantasy world?
A: Why not? The plot degenerates into the absurd. Yet, it is still the most logical conclusion it could have come to, really. These people and their motivations are absurd. Easily solved problems whose difficulties are perpetuated by their reluctance to ask for help, or just by simply admitting their short-comings--which no one in *Found Things* will do, except Missing, in the end. In their ancient tradition, the "dragon" was driven from the shores by a combination of golden tribute and the making of noise. So why wouldn't "Wee Willy Winkie" and "Auntie Mim's Marvelous Macintosh" serve just as well as some archaic chant?

Q: How hard is it for you to bring humor into a story? Do you struggle with it or does it come naturally to you? Can you answer this question seriously?
A: So, three elves walk into a bar…oh, wait, you wanted a serious answer. The trick is not to try. When you try to put humor in, it becomes forced and obvious, and my critiquers get after me. That's okay for parodies, like *Bored of the Rings*, but not so good when you're trying to write something serious. And, believe it or not, the underlying premise of Found Things is supposed to be serious. It's about a young girl without many prospects who hides from life by writing. I can honestly say, I did use my writing as a kid to hide from a lot of things that were going on in my life, so there's some truth to the pain Missing goes through, having to realize things are going to change whether

she wants them to or not. Also, I've been told by a reviewer or two that the prose is too serious to go with the dialogue. So, obviously, it's really the dialogue that's funny. And I couldn't say why. If you take the individual comments apart, you can see that the characters mean them with all honesty, yet somehow the reader is able to see the absurdity of it.

And as for the prose being too serious for the dialogue, well, there is a definite expectation of humorous fantasy out there right now. You're either doing post-modern parody with every line, or you're doing Bored of the Rings-style satire. My books don't have any great redeeming values like that. They're just about some characters facing changes they don't like, and how they cope with that. Sometimes I throw in some magic. As the books progress, they become more violent actually, because the story that begins with *Found Things* is just the beginning of some pretty climactic events. People are going to die, because bad people do bad things. And other people are going to find little nuggets of courage in order to survive. There's no getting around that, in order to let the story evolve. But even so, the characters stay true to themselves, and even in the worst situations humans find a way of coping, often with humor, even if they don't realize they're being funny.

Q: Is this a stand-alone novel? What other projects are you working on?
A: Some articles for a nice little e-zine…and there are always a few short stories boiling in the pot. The version of *Found Things* run in Deep Magic is a stand-alone novel. The revised version is also a stand-alone novel, although more hints are dropped. The planned finale is a series of five, the Par Fonderance Saga. Par Fonderance being the kingdom in which it takes place. Another possible Peake influence. Pondering on far away places became Par Fonderance. Far Ponderance seemed too obvious so I switched consonants, but now the secret's out, I suppose.

The first 3 novels are stand-alones, yet they each introduce another element that will eventually lead up to the last two. In the last two novels, the first 3 major characters unite to face the great and sinister evil of an old god who just doesn't want to stay dead. And lemme tell you, he's a scary guy. Missing Sealyham, Roger, Orangia, and others will be united with Modlie Tuck and her recovering alcoholic mother, a cat who used to be a god, a librarian nun and some geriatric warrior nuns, as well as a long cast-list of characters, including a mysterious breed of lamp-lighters called the Glimmer Men. All your favorites from *Found Things* will be there, including Titus and the Black Lotus. Eventually, Eleganta Sulk will die, though you may be surprised how, since she's got her magic dentures and all. And if that's not enough of a teaser, somebody's going to have a baby. I won't say who, although from *Found Things* there are at least 3 possibilities. And I'm not going to tell you who they are, either.

It's the Economy, Stupid

by Mark Reeder

Richard Houseman, a Case Western Reserve law student with bushy hair, a saturnine face and large glasses, whose tinted myopic prescription obscured dazed and dissolute hazel eyes, poured his pendulous flesh into a lounge chair near the hotel pool. He had managed, in his third year, to escape the intemperate Ohio winter in order to visit his parents celebrating their twenty-fifth wedding anniversary in Palm Beach, Florida. Richard sprawled, his mind in vacatory inebriation, but he did not feel like celebrating at all. Midway through his third year he knew no job on Wall Street waited for him. No prestigious firm offered him fabulous sums of money to join their stable of eager young lawyers, braced by expensive three-piece suits with suspenders and vests, ready to take on corporate giants and make millions through leveraged buyouts, requiring reams of contracts indemnifying the parties of the first part to the parties of the second part, etc. etc. etc. Richard languished at the bottom of his class in law school. The door to riches and security had slammed shut. He despaired even to chase ambulances.

At wit's end, Richard lay at the poolside in gloomy discontent, vowing he would give anything, even his soul, to be in a top East Coast firm, brandishing a legal pad like some 18th century buccaneer would a cutlass. Morose, filled with doom and gloom, he sighed and sunk deeper into his chair.

Richard ducked his head and lowered his voice in a conspiratorial whisper. "You're the Devil," he repeated.

"Eh, Richard," a disembodied voice with a distinctly Australian accent called out to him.

His eyes fluttered. His mouth opened to warn the voice to leave him in his misery, when through his beery veil he spotted a dark man with pointed ears, a sly grin, and two very distinct knobs on either side of his head.

The dark man smiled and slid into the nearby deck chair.

"G'day, mate. Mind if I join you here? You have a ripper spot—far enough away from the board so as not to get splashed and not too near the shallow end to avoid the kids."

Richard, suddenly sober, came bolt upright out of his lounge and stared openly at the man beside him.

The dark man looked back at him knowingly and winked.

"You noticed. Not many do, you know."

"You're the Devil!" Richard blurted out loud.

Other guests turned to look at the two of them.

Richard ducked his head and lowered his voice in a conspiratorial whisper. "You're the Devil," he repeated.

"Too right, mate. Mephistopheles at your service."

"You're here to trade for my soul?" Richard asked incredulously.

"Have at ya, cobber. That's just a figure of speech. Actually, I don't do much anymore, service

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Found Things
By M. Thomas

Author's Note: My heartfelt thanks to two special readers. Mark Reeder, without whose eloquent praise I might not have kept some of my best passages. And especially to the selfless devotion of my good friend, Steven McCrary, without whom it might not have all fit together.

This is for Steven, my first reader.

Chapter 12

The song the queen and Lenore sang was not, in fact, "Wee Willie Winkle."

It was "Auntie Mim's Marvelous Macintosh," with the myriad pockets that needed to be filled. There was one for A, apples, and B, bears, and C, well, Orangia just couldn't bring herself to say it. Lenore helped.

"Ca…car…carn…?"

"Carnal," Orangia admitted.

"And D?"

"Desrrrrs," Orangia said.

"What was that?" the queen prompted.

"Carnal Desires," Orangia said.

"And E?" the queen said.

Orangia sighed. "Erertc."

"Erotic." The queen giggled. "That's E. Now, what shall we have for F?"

They watched a moment longer as the creature snuffled her way to the tunnel opening, then slipped through as quietly as water through a sluice. One-by-one the others emerged.

They looked at her. Orangia took another large dram of her tonic and sucked on a quarter of lime, thinking. They were just girls, really, and here she sat in the middle of the floor playing foolish girls' games over a bottle of Ivy's medicinal brew. Yet even as she looked on from behind the bemused veneer of still-liquor, she added up the sum total of her spiritual debt and decided that she was owed. For all she had endured and overcome–her orphaned charge, the diapers and upset stomachs, her own coming-out and the beautiful dress that had gone to waste that night, the lifetime of living up to standards of propriety very few of her class bothered to aspire to, the extra mending and a long, meaningless job washing other people's laundry–she was owed, she felt this strongly, an adolescence.

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"Then we must go in a dream," the Dream-Magic whispered. "Sleep, Seldra." He gathered slivers of golden mist and formed a zephyr to ride across the endless space. "Dream, Seldra. Dream Real."

* * *

At first, everything was jumbled together – the corner of her room, the image of her parents in the field, the sounds of a silver wolf and a metal man – but it all merged and disappeared. She was lifted high above the earth. She found herself astride a winged horn-lizard, who spoke in the voice of the Dream-Magic. "My name is Gorpho," the lizard said.

Below were shadowy pits of darkness, but the horizon ahead glistened with the brilliance of sixteen suns. An ice rainbow arched across to meet them, and Gorpho fastened his short forelegs into the stripes of orange and yellow. He licked at the ice with his slithery tongue. "Drink some, Seldra, it's good," he said.

Seldra dismounted and put her tongue to the rainbow. She had never tasted anything so sweet, and suddenly all her senses came alive and expanded like the unfolding dawn of the universe. She smelled the fruits of the rainbow, saw each facet of its brilliance, and heard the crystals of ice as they formed and disintegrated. Then, from somewhere across the vast distance, she heard screams of raw torture slicing the air. The voice was familiar. "It is Avion!" Seldra cried.

"No, it's not Avion." Gorpho curved his zigzag tail around Seldra and lifted her onto his back. "It is the moon-witch, who has but one eye and no arms or legs. We must answer her distress call."

But Seldra recalled Avion's threats in the past: "I am the Dream-Weaver's daughter. I will become the strands of my father's patterns to invade your dreams. Beware of fire, and ice, and moonlight, and darkness, for I will become all of them, and your dreams will be nightmares!"

Gorpho flew toward the moon-witch's lair. "Don't go, turn around," Seldra pleaded. "It is a trick, it is really Avion."

The beast turned his head to smile at Seldra. "Oh, I think you must be dreaming," he said with a laugh.

Eerie chills crawled over Seldra's body. The horn-lizard was no longer her friend, the Dream-Magic. He was now someone else who mocked her. Mentally Seldra retraced her dream. The ice rainbow – of course! Avion had threaded some disturbing potion into the ice rainbow so that when he drank, it would change Gorpho's character. "I want to wake up!" Seldra shouted. "I don't want to dream any more."

But she could not wake up, for she was dreaming Real.

Gorpho said, "The moon-witch wants to see you. This is her lair." He turned his body half-ward, and Seldra tumbled off. She fell slowly, through air and smoke, rocks and sand, through crystals and silk and oceans and star-froth. She landed in a cavity of bone-dust, with a huge ball of ivory rags hovering over her.

The ball lowered one rag from the middle of itself, and Seldra saw the eye of the moon-witch. "Where is it?" the rag-ball demanded in Avion's voice. "What have you done with the Dream-Magic?"

"It has escaped," Seldra replied, knowing at once this really had happened. When the Dream-Magic felt the change in Gorpho, it vanished from his body. It would not stay to be trapped.

"Escaped?" the moon-witch shrilled in Avion's voice. "And left you here alone in the dream-space? Ha! You'll never find your way back alone. Without the Dream-Magic to guide you, you are lost forever to the nightmares!" The ball of rags laughed so hard it cried, and the tears ran down into the frayed edges. "There is no one now to guard the opening, and it is mine for the taking! I have

won!"

"You have not won!" Seldra cried. She stood up and shook herself free of bone-dust, then thrust herself upon the ball of rags. She unwound it quickly, pulling each piece from the outer edge and working toward the center – the eye. Each rag fell to the floor, taking a shaft of moonlight with it. The lair grew dark, except for the slashes of rag-light upon the floor.

"You fool!" Avion screamed. "You have destroyed the moonlight!"

Seldra pulled the last two pieces from around the eye. "Goodbye, Avion," she said, and ran from the lair with the two rag-lights to guide her steps.

"Never goodbye," the magic-stealer called after her. "I will pick another pattern from my father's supply, and I shall hunt down the Dream-Magic long before you can find your way home!"

* * *

The echoes of Avion's words followed Seldra into the blackness. She attached the two rag-lights to the belt of her tunic, and went forward along a rocky trail that inclined upward. Dark shapes with dead eyes and long, shining teeth lingered near the pathway. "Dream-Magic!" Seldra called out. "Can you hear me? Where are you?"

There was no reply, and Seldra smelled the moldy breath of the damp phantoms that had come up out of their graves to hunt her. She walked faster, for she felt the hissing of their silent words upon her skin as she sensed their fingers curling toward her. She called again and again, "Dream-Magic! Come and help me, please!"

But only the shrouded ghouls moved against the wrinkled air to touch her, wanting to taste her….

She ran. The rag-lights bounced against her thighs, and she could see the trail was growing wider. She darted into a hollow of blurred reflections. Shadowy mists swirled and flowed and gathered about her.

Seldra's throat was dry as she listened to the ghouls hissing past. At last all became still. They were gone. Seldra sank down upon a patch of rusty earth and wished for a drink of cool water. The fog surged around her, and made her rag-lights hazy. She couldn't see anything except her own smeared reflection, multiplied many times over in the rolling mist.

From somewhere nearby she heard the gurgle of water – a spring! Seldra badly wanted a drink. She stood to push through the fog, but her own reflections pushed back. Whichever way she turned, her own blurry image followed. She swung her arms at the swirls of vapor, only to bump against her own swinging arms. Perhaps she could kick out an opening. She slammed her foot into the fog, and felt the kick returned in the same instant.

Seldra stood still and tried to reason – why was she trapped by her own reflections? There had to be a way out.

The nearby spring gurgled into a laugh, and Seldra recognized Avion's voice. "Now we are even," the Dream-Weaver's daughter called. "You stole my moonlight, and I have stolen your identity. You can never escape from your reflections, for you have no substance, only images from the past. I will become you, and take your place at the opening in the corner of your room. The Dream-Magic will be mine!"

Seldra clenched her fists. If only she had a weapon. But what would cut through a fog made of her own reflections? She had nothing to work with. Why had the Dream-Magic deserted her?

"Dream-Magic!" she called. "I need a weapon! I need to get through the fog. I must get home to protect the opening. Help me, Dream-Magic!""

The night was still. The gurgle of the spring water ceased, and the mist swirled silently. The

only sound was a soft breeze, lifting Seldra's hair across her eyes. As she pushed it back, she realized she could have no reflection if there was no light to see it with.

She sat down upon the rusty earth and removed her goatskin boots. Then she pulled the two rag-lights from her tunic belt and folded them halfway against themselves, so that the light was inside. The sudden darkness frightened her. She felt her bones freeze up; for a long moment she couldn't move. "The darkness can't hurt anyone," she whispered, repeating words her mother spoke to her when Seldra was a little girl and afraid to be alone in the dark. "It is only the daylight turned inside out."

Gaining strength and courage from the image of her mother's gentle face, Seldra tucked the rag-lights into her boots and laced them back onto her feet. The extra bulk felt tight, but when she escaped from the fog, she would need the rag-lights to guide her again. She could see nothing, and went by the feel of things. Slowly and carefully she crept forward and hoped nothing would be in her path.

* * *

For a long time, Seldra crept steadily ahead on her hands and knees. She had no way of knowing where she was, and an icy shiver trembled along her spine when she thought of what could happen. If she were crawling along the side of a mountain, she could fall off. If she were creeping toward the den of a bear, he could tear the flesh from her bones before she could run. Or she might meet other strange creatures, gargoyles or vultures. As soon as these thoughts crossed her mind, she put them away, for she couldn't afford to be fearful. There was no alternative – she must keep going. "Oh, Dream-Magic," she whispered, "I have never been so miserable."

* * *

Seldra crept onward, and wondered if she had left the hollow of blurred reflections. Fog had no texture that she could feel, so she couldn't tell unless she shone a light on her surroundings. She would have to take a chance.

As soon as she unfolded the rag-lights, Seldra saw that she was no longer on the rocky trail or anywhere near the foggy hollow. As she stood up, she saw the surface beneath her had turned solid and gray. All around her were tall structures with many doors and windows, and within, lights were coming on. On the roadway, tall poles held round globes that now began to glow. What was this place?

Seldra refolded the rag-lights and tucked them back into her belt. Near the buildings, she saw some transparent shapes slide past. The vague outline of a child's face flowed across a window and was gone. Sounds of distant music drifted toward her, and papery voices rose and fell in subtle whispers. Were there people here?

"Hello," Seldra called. "Is someone here? Please, speak to me, tell me where I am." But the dream-shapes and sounds floated away into the silence.

Ahead Seldra saw a large round fountain with splashing waterfalls. She ran to it and let the clear water run into her cupped hands to drink.

"Oh, Dream-Magic, that was good," she said, drying her fingers on the bottom of her tunic. "But what is this place I have come to? Are you hidden behind one of these strange buildings? Please come out, Dream-Magic, so that I will know you are safe, and not stolen by the Dream-Weaver's daughter. And tell me – am I awake, or am I dreaming?"

Violent crashes of thunder shook the earth, and Seldra almost lost her balance. If a great

storm came, she must find shelter. She looked about, and saw the buildings were now leaning in toward her, like huge fingers ready to pounce. The fountain where she quenched her thirst was now a cascade of coiled snakes, squirming toward her. The smoothness beneath her feet had turned into a row of large jaws full of pointed teeth that snapped at her legs.

Seldra ran, but her feet weren't moving. She looked behind her, and saw the finger-buildings leaning closer, the snakes slithering at her heels, and the jaws within inches of her flesh. With all of her strength she struggled to move her feet, but she couldn't run. Needles of panic darted over her, and she opened her mouth to scream – but no sound came.

And then, from the surrounding buildings and snakes and jaws, she heard Avion's laughter. From the fogless night and the moonless sky, from the center of the earth and from beyond the air, Avion's screeches and hoots echoed and resounded against Seldra's ears.

"You escaped the hollow of blurred reflections," the Dream-Weaver's daughter screamed. "But you can never escape the future! My father has woven a dream of a city from many centuries to come. It is filled with ghosts of the future. You'll never get home to protect the opening in your corner, and I shall steal all the Dream-Magic, for this dream has used up my father's supply."

So she was not awake, but dreaming Real, Seldra concluded. The hot breath of the jaws gnashed behind her, and her racing heart jumped to her throat, but still she could not move. Think she told herself. If this was the last supply of Dream-Magic, and the dream was nearly used up, it would end, abruptly. She would awaken in her own cot, with the opening not tampered with or the Dream-Magic stolen. Somehow, she must prolong this dream and keep Avion here, so that she could not get to the opening before Seldra returned.

"Avion, is your father weaving this dream while we are in it?" Seldra asked.

"Yes. He gathers the strands that dangle from our unspoken thoughts."

"Do you know how it will end?"

"The pattern is kept safely in my father's loom, so I cannot tell. But I must go, for you are trying to trick me, and I don't know your method, so now I will leave."

"Wait, Avion! I will tell you how to steal all the Dream-Magic, without going through the opening, if you set me free."

"There is a way? Speak quickly, for I must not be here when this dream ends, or I will be swallowed by these buildings, and the snakes and the jaws."

Seldra dragged her words out slowly, playing for time. She said, "Avion – why don't you show yourself, and talk to me face to face?"

"Another trick? I have no substance in dreams. My father creates me from his patterns. I live in the loom. Now tell me quickly, how do I steal the Dream-Magic without going through the opening?"

"The opening is dangerous," Seldra said, making things up as she went along.

"Then tell me how I can avoid it," Avion demanded.

"In the hole there are rats as large as horses, and spiders with eyes of pus and legs of poison thorns."

"Stop!" Avion shouted. "Time grows short. I do not care about these things, only how to get the Dream-Ma—"

Her voice stopped. A strange dimness spread over everything, as the lights on the poles vanished. The faint hum of ragged threads, blowing against each other, fluttered at the corners of the shrinking scene. Piece by piece, little by little, the fountains, the buildings, the sky – everything – disintegrated into fragments that tumbled helter-skelter in the air. Behind the scene, great chunks of color unraveled and frittered into nowhere. Against the empty space, Seldra saw her own silhouette tilt sideways, and she fell, her body weightless and shadowless.

She fell slowly, past parts of old, discarded dreams: landscapes full of maggot holes, crackled faces with flesh peeling off, rain falling upside down. She discovered that by swinging her arms out from her sides, she could steer clear of the tons of debris that floated down in endless designs. She saw a tree growing from a shoe, a cloud of green flies drinking serpent's blood, a spirit-shadow dancing on a candle flame.

Seldra pumped her arms and tried to look beneath her. How far would she fall? It seemed that days, even years, had passed since she started on this journey of dead dreams. "Where are you, Dream-Magic?" she called, her voice thin and watery.

Her hair had grown long, and turned gray, and her tunic was rotted with age. The goatskin boots of her youth were worn down into brittle scraps.

Seldra's arms grew weary. She knew now that she was falling toward her grave – she was old and near death. The dream fragments around her thinned out, and Seldra realized that the Dream-Weaver's crippled loom had come to the end of its unraveling. If only she could devise a way to wake up, in her own cot, before this became one of the dead dreams headed for oblivion.

Nearby, an empty shadow tumbled slowly past. Seldra watched it float downward, turning in upon itself over and over. It was a hole – the opening to the other side where the Dream-Magic lived. Seldra tried to grab it, but it eluded her. How could she capture it?

She looked down at her clothing – there was nothing she could use. Then she noticed the rag-lights were still in perfect condition, tucked into her now shabby belt. And she knew at once that she had brought them on this long journey across time and space for a reason. She pulled them out and wound them tightly into two glowing balls, and tossed them rapidly, one after the other, into the opening.

"Ouch!" said the Dream-Magic. "Why did you hit me with your rag-light balls?"

The opening began to glow, and Seldra saw her hands regaining their youthfulness as she floated in the shadow of a cloud. "I called and you didn't answer," she said. "I was afraid I would die in that journey of dead dreams."

"That would never happen. My magic always surrounds you, even when you dream Real."

"But where were you?" Seldra felt herself growing younger, and her heartbeat was stronger.

"I was busy shredding the threads of the Dream-Weaver's loom. To do that I had to keep my finger on the shuttle, until all the patterns were distorted and tattered. When it ran out of magic, the loom shattered into many fragments.""Will there be no more dreams?" Seldra asked as she drifted downward onto her cot, knowing she was again eighteen.

"Yes, there will always be dreams," replied the Dream-Magic from his hideaway on the other side of the opening. "The Dream-Weaver is even now rebuilding his loom from the splintered remains of the old one. He will forever seek my magic, so always keep guard, for he will send Avion to taunt you again and again. With your cleverness and bravery, you have outwitted the Dream-Weaver and his daughter, and there is no one else who can meet that challenge. I rely on you to guard the opening, Seldra, for you alone can defeat Avion."

Seldra looked out the window where her family worked in the field. They would never know the many adventures she had experienced, or the satisfaction of defeating Avion. They would never have a mission as demanding or rewarding as hers. She envied their place in the field no more, for only she had the privilege of guarding the Dream-Magic.

Seldra smiled, and placed her fist into the opening in the corner.

The End

Leave a message for this story.

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them, but I will not stand and fight. I know they see me as a horrible monster, but I know – deep in my heart – that is not what I am.

The End

Leave a message for this story.

Continued from page 19
me," he screamed. The two men wrestled with him and held him down. The merciful ether had long gone. Someone placed a stick in the boy's mouth. He bit hard, clenched his fists, and stared at Robert with tortured, wild eyes. Heart pounding, Robert gripped a sharp, heavy knife like a vise, and stood over him.

As he focused his attention on the leg, an inexplicable sensation of fleeing overcame him, from what he could not imagine. Although he was inside the hospital shelter, crowded with the blue-clad injured and sick, he heard faint, haunting screams and shouts of men and women outside. The barn and its environs began fading from view. The raging storm withered away.

Angry billows of dust rose from frantic running. Distraught cries of children searching for mothers reverberated in the background. An apparition of a shrieking woman flashed by, an arrow stuck in her shoulder, blood gushing out. By her side, the silhouette of a little girl ran, her large dark eyes wracked by fright. He sensed the hissing of an arrow crack the wind and smelled the smoke of musket gunpowder. Warm summer oak limbs brushed his face as he too, felt his body flee, as if escaping from a grave and ominous predicament.

"Too bad," he heard one of the aides say, jolting him from the peculiar reverie. "One so young to lose a leg."

"Yes, indeed it is," remarked Robert, jerking his attention to the situation at hand, perspiration moistening his face and back. Taking a deep breath, he wiped the knife on his bloodstained apron, raised it, then with great force and precision, severed the mutilated leg just above the knee. A dull thud sounded as the severed leg dropped into a tub below. The boy collapsed. A stream of blood ran off the table. The ordeal was over, a success. Robert took another deep breath, and exhaled with relief.

Outside, streaks of lightening and thunder slashed the wind-driven rain.

"It's done, sir," stated one of the aides, as he bandaged the bleeding stub.

"Yes it is," responded Robert, cleaning his hands of the poor boy's blood. "He'll survive." So young to endure a limb loss, he thought, troubled.

Robert felt strange again. Weak tremors consumed his body. Before his eyes, the sounds and sights of the wounded, the hospital, and the raging storm paled into a lost horizon. In its faint wake, ghastly images took form. The same old oaks dotted the summer of the grounds sprinkled with tufts of green grass. A robin flew past. Clouds of dust settled. In the distance, against the silence of the peaceful twilit sky, a girl's form was etched beneath the branches of a large oak. She appeared bent over an exhausted woman lying on grassy turf, something protruding from her shoulder.

Startled, he rubbed his eyes and looked again. He was no longer inside the hospital barn, with his patients. He was, however, out on the same grounds as the barn, but there was no barn. The same creek was a short distance away, gurgling along its course. This is absurd, he reflected. He shifted his attention to the woman and child. There was no mistaking it. It was the same pair he saw in the bizarre illusion of an hour ago. How peculiar that they should be here. An eerie feeling slithered down his spine. Twigs snapped underneath his boots as he made his way to them.

"Hello," Robert said.

Startled, the girl looked at him, ashen-faced and strained. Her eyes were wide open with dread. The woman, covered by a thin blanket, moaned from pain.

"Hello," he repeated.

Terrified, she nodded, and faced the woman.

"Don't fear. I'm not going to hurt you. What happened that frightened you so?"

"The ambush," choked the young girl. "We weren't prepared. My mother, she got hurt something terrible. She's bleeding, she's dying." She turned her head, facing him. "She's got an

arrow in her shoulder. Tried to pull it out, but it's stuck. I don't know what to do. No doctors here. So many of us got hurt. Everybody else went over yonder." She pointed toward the creek where many cared for their own.

He recalled the odd feeling of flight he had earlier, just before his first amputation of the day. It must have been this woman and child he had envisioned before, running for their lives.

"Perhaps I can help," he offered. "Arrow wounds are not always fatal."

Robert pulled back the cover and examined the bleeding, painful shoulder. An arrowhead was lodged deep in the bone, its shaft sticking out. He began wiping away the blood from the injury, preparing its extraction from the miserable woman.

Grasping the arrow's shaft, he pulled and failed. It was stuck. The woman screamed, then fainted. The girl gasped, tears welling up in her eyes. Again he tried. This time it dislodged, along with some bone fragments. From torn strips of petticoat, he dressed the wound.

"She'll be all right," Robert assured the daughter.

"We're pretty grateful to you, sir," said the girl. "She would have died for sure if you hadn't helped."

He smiled in return and asked, "What is your name?"

Beads of perspiration dripped down her forehead. Still worried and exhausted she answered, "It's Megan. Megan White, sir."

"What is your age?"

"I'm ten years old, sir," she said, twitching a strand of hair. She covered her mother with the blanket and hovered over her. The girl gave him no further concern.

A loud, piercing thunderclap yanked him from the trance. Furious rain hammered the ground and barn. Inside, the dankness failed to camouflage the nauseating smell of sickness, blood and the pain of the maimed. Wails persisted.

At his feet, on the hard dirt floor, lay a motionless soldier, a bullet in his back. He put his hand on the man's damp forehead. It felt cold. He probed for a pulse, but there was none. Death struck during the night. After a short time, two stone-faced soldiers with a stretcher came and set it down on the ground beside the corpse. They rolled it onto the stretcher and without comment, whisked it out of sight to the death house. As he watched, Robert felt the blood drain from his face. He continued with his rounds. The day slipped to evening.

Bit by bit, while listening to the weary rain, Robert discerned a warm, sunny sensation overtaking the misery of the barn. The battering rain ceased, the wintry gloom withered. In the distance a bluebird chimed. Bright drops of sunlight splashed onto Megan's dark, glossy hair. She sat, alone, on the single step of her log-built dwelling, stitching homespun linen. The outside air felt warm and pleasant. Robert smiled.

"How is your mother?"

"She's fine, sir."

"Has her shoulder healed?"

"Yes, sir. She has good use of her arm, even though there's an ugly scar," she replied, straightening the pleats of her hand-stitched muslin frock. "We had a frightful scare that day in the woods."

He wrinkled his eyebrows, perplexed. Impossible. How could her mother recover in a few short hours?

"If you hadn't happened along that afternoon, two years back," she continued, "I would be an orphan today, more so since my father passed on soon after my birth."

Two years ago! Stunned, he scrutinized Megan in detail. She had the same dark eyes, the same

dark hair, bundled at the nape of her neck. She seemed a bit taller than before. Overall, she appeared older than when he saw her last. In fact, she looked like a twelve-year-old. Bewildered, he swallowed some air. Moments of silence followed.

For the want of something to say Robert found himself asking, "Do you like poetry?" and pulled out the printed sheets he placed in his breast pocket, what seemed to him, that morning. "I have some you can read for your pleasure."

"I like listening when somebody recites it, but I can't read what's there."

"Why not?"

"Don't know my letters, sir," Megan bit her lower lip, abashed. "No need to know them. Girls can't learn such things anyway."

"You can if you want to," he said. "They're easy to master. Come, I'll show you." He picked up a twig and drew a few letters in the hard packed earth, sounding them out at the same time.

"You try," he said, handing her the makeshift writing tool.

"No, I can't do things like that," she replied. "I'm good at regular chores, like sewing, cooking and cleaning. Don't have a need for letter learning."

"There's so much more, Megan. At least try," he encouraged her. "Watch." After smoothing the dirt, he repeated the examples. She puckered her nose. Curiosity sparked an interest in the girl while she observed and listened.

Soft summer breezes whispered through the branches of the old oak trees. Nearby, a bluebird perched upon the blossoms of an apple branch, chirping a melodic tune. Fleecy clouds sailed across the blue sky.

"Try it. You can do it," he said, pressing her on. He placed the twig in her hand. At a snail's pace, she scraped first an 'a,' then a 'b,' into the hard-packed earth. Her first efforts, at best, were awkward, the letters no more than scribbles. She tried and failed and tried again. At last, the sketched letters became clear and strong; the writing boasted a gentle slant.

"I did it." She dimpled, her eyes sparkling. Clasping her hands in excitement, she added, "I did it. And want to do more!" The corners of his mouth tilted upward. He had sown the seeds of desire, a desire to learn, in her. They spent the remainder of the sunny afternoon on alphabet lessons.

* * *

The rain continued.

After departing from the post office in town, Robert stopped at the general merchandise store. While selecting some provisions, he came across a dusty shelf in the back. On one side lay some old, weather-beaten books. Shuffling through the selection, he found a speller with simple grammar. It still had a few years of use left. Perfect for Megan. He hesitated. This is quite ludicrous, he told himself. She doesn't even exist. Nothing but a figment of my imagination.

Nevertheless, he purchased it along with the other supplies, then returned to the hospital. That evening he ate alone, wondering about Megan. She and her mother were obviously newcomers, settling the land where the barn stood, but in years gone by, in 1678! Absurd. Convinced that she and everything associated with her was an illusion, Robert retired to his quarters before his customary time. Placing an oil lamp on a small, rough table beside his cot he settled for a long night. He picked up the speller and opened it flat on his lap, turning the pages, first one then two.

The sixth page developed a faint wrinkle down its center. Robert spied it. A tingling, odd sensation rippled through his fingers as he held the volume. The wrinkle grew. It branched into the adjoining page. Pages six and seven stared up at him, and like lightening shattering dark rain-swept

skies, the wrinkle radiated into more wrinkles. Stunned, he watched as both leaves began to writhe and crinkle. Robert froze. With closed eyes, he felt the pages twist and turn. The book's back arched upward. Startled, he opened his eyes, and watched the whole speller warp and crumple.

And then, like a solar flare, it exploded into the white feathery flames of a dove.

He rose, bracing the elegant bird on the backs of his hands and launched it upwards. The bird spread its regal wings and soared into the clear blue sky. He watched it a few moments as it flew away, then dropped onto the cot. Closing his blood-shot eyes, drained from the exhausting demands of the day, he drifted into a light, disturbed sleep.

In the morning Robert woke with a start. Beside him, on the rugged table, lay the speller, fine and well preserved. The dove must have been a strange dream, nothing more, he assured himself. Things like that don't happen. He stopped dead in his thoughts. On top of the cover lay a single white feather. He opened the volume to pages six and seven. They were as smooth as silk.

In the margins, simple scribbled words stared at him. It's as if someone had been practicing, he reasoned. It looked like Megan's writing style. His mind must be playing tricks. After all, he could have scratched those words himself, and not Megan.

She didn't exist. The girl never had, had she? She was nothing more than a phantom from his imagination. He never met nor spoke to her. The realities of hallucinations are not possible. She lived almost two hundred years back, if she had indeed existed at all. But the handwriting, strong with a gentle slant, was hers.

Robert thought of something. A week later, while on break from duties, he spearheaded to the general store and bought a few more books, one about history, another grammar and a third containing stories. That night he stacked them on the rough table by his bedside, careful to place the volumes not too near the oil lamp.

The following morning he woke before sunrise. While stretching, he noticed the books. They were just as he had placed them the night before, except a solitary white feather lay on top.

* * *

Robert thought Megan looked radiant as he approached the crooked creek that flowed behind her cottage. She sat upon a log, dangling bare feet in the crisp spray of its cool waters. She gave him a wide smile from beneath a plain straw hat, brimming with the innocence of youth. At fifteen, she was graceful and handsome with a figure that any mother would be proud of.

"It's a pleasure to see you this morning," said Robert.

"Good morning," she tossed her head back and smiled.

Eyeing a few loose sheets in one hand, a quill in the other, he asked, "What are you holding?"

"Nothing," she replied, her cheeks reddening.

"It appears to be prose of some sort. You're writing. I would enjoy reading anything you pen. Could you share it with me?"

"Oh, no, please," she replied. "I cannot do that." Her face darkened.

"Why not?" asked Robert, confused with the sudden change of demeanor.

"Nobody knows about them. No one must ever know," replied Megan. "My mother calls writings useless rubbish filling my head. She says such things take time away from chores. Poetry and prose have no use here."

"It's not useless," said Robert.

"To do such things is unwomanly, reading and writing like I do." She shifted her weight. "Please, don't let anyone know. This must be kept a secret."

Thunder crashed after electric bolts of lightening shattered the dark, grey skies. It hauled Robert back to reality. The tiring rain persisted.

"Doctor Tarlton. Two more arriving," an orderly bellowed, in a deep voice. Four men were carrying them in out of the dreary weather. Both were wet, dirty, and blood soaked. One was placed on an empty pine-bough bed. The other, dazed, lifted onto the butcher's block, his right arm fractured. Robert fought the attacking nausea. Another limb, perhaps another death. The horror of it all appalled him.

Several times during the next few weeks he walked into town and purchased a book, each one on a different topic. Occasionally, he would choose a volume with stories. Then, before retiring for the night, he would set it on the bedside table. As always, he drifted to sleep, comforted by the knowledge that a white dove's feather would be found on top of the volume the following morning. It struck him as peculiar that he never encountered the white dove again.

* * *

Fluffy clouds pierced by sunbeams drifted across the clear blue sky. Beneath the blossoms of an apple tree, hidden from the view of the cottage, sat Megan, somewhere in her mid-twenties. She read from a volume full of short stories and sipped cool lemonade, a pile of handwritten verses by her side. Summer breezes graced her soft, dark hair.

"Good afternoon," said Robert.

"Good afternoon," she responded, a smile gracing her mouth, eyes twinkling. She offered him a glass of the refreshing drink.

He could smell hot bread loaves, and pumpkin custard cooling on a windowpane, and the sweetness of fresh baked cinnamon rolls.

"You seem delighted," said Robert.

"I am," she replied pleased to see him. "It's my secret. I wish to share it with you."

"Please do."

"In my spare time I've crafted some poetry and short stories." Genuine pride was reflected in her voice. "You'll be the first person to read my work."

He took the sheets from her hand and read three of several poems, and two of the stories. They were romantic. Admiration shone in his eyes.

"They're beautiful, Megan."

She smiled, and thanked him.

"Share them with the world. Get them published," he urged.

"Oh, I couldn't," she answered, dejection resonating in her voice. "It's not that I wouldn't want to. Nobody publishes what a woman composes, let alone read it. I would be embarrassed."

"They're captivating Megan," he persisted.

"No, it is not to be," she said.

"Try."

* * *

That was the last time he saw or spoke to Megan, seven years ago. He often wondered what became of her. Perhaps she had been nothing more than an illusion, an escape from the sights of battle-inflicted agony. It seemed so real, however, those warm days spent tutoring her letters and grammar, of discussing medicine and other subjects, and reading her poems and stories under apple

blossoms. He enjoyed it. She proved to have been such an eager and capable student. Yet he had nothing to prove that she even once existed, nothing. Those phantom memories seemed of a time so long ago.

While preparing his lecture notes, Robert thought back to the horror and suffering of the wounded during the war. It haunted him still. He flinched at the recollection of the piles of bloody, wasted limbs his blade created, albeit, it often saved many lives. Too many maimed or dead, though. He always pitied them.

He never regretted leaving that bloody occupation; it was the best decision possible. Teaching gave him greater satisfaction.

After delivering his physiology lecture to first year medical students, he strolled over to the new bookshop, a mile away from campus. At the shop, he plunged into browsing, a favorite past time.

A pleasant looking woman in her mid-twenties, dark hair plaited at the nape of her neck and skin smoother than cream, stood at the counter. She smiled at him.

"May I help you?" she asked.

"No thank you," he replied. He looked at her and felt a shadow of familiarity. "I'm looking around today." After a pause he added, "Have we met before?"

"I don't believe so. I have recently arrived in this city," she smiled, reflecting sparkles in her brown eyes.

"If there is a particular book you want, please let me know, sir. I would be glad to help you."

"Well, perhaps there is," responded Robert, prolonging the conversation. "Poetry and short stories always give me enjoyment."

"Any type of poetry or stories?"

"No, not really."

"Well, I may have something that might interest you," she said.

She weaved her way past shelves and stacks to a side table displaying several publications. He followed her.

"This arrangement has some books, either short stories or poetry." Pointing to a small edition, she added, "However, this one contains both. It was composed long ago by my great-grandmother. It got published a month before her marriage." A hint of family pride radiated from her face.

In the center of the display, bound in rich brown leather, lay the volume. A painting of a white dove graced the corner. Robert picked it up and examined it. The title and author's name were embossed in gold. Its title was, *Where the Silvery Creek Runs: Tales and Verses*.

With a start, he eyed the writer's name in disbelief. This can't be, he reasoned. Opening it to the third page, he saw the inscription, bold and beautiful. It read:

To Dr. Robert Tarlton, Thank you.

And the author: Megan White.

It happened. She did it, was all he could think of. She achieved what she believed she couldn't. Megan, you did it! A sense of gratified accomplishment washed over him. As he thumbed through the pages, his eyes moistened, feeling her success.

Yes, Megan White, his thoughts continued, you're a ghost from the past, dead and long gone, but your exotic prose dances gracefully across the years, never to fade from eternity.

"I'll purchase this one," he said, a slight smile crossing his face. "It's splendid."

"Yes, it's a lovely volume."

The sparkle in her eyes charmed him.

A few days later he found himself in the bookshop again, browsing among the many volumes on the shelves. At the counter, Megan's great granddaughter, lovely in a yellow and cream dress with a shawl draped around her shoulders, was helping a fair and plump woman. He picked up a thick book, oblivious to its title, and began leafing through the pages.

"These two books are delightful," she spoke to the plump woman. "I believe your young niece and nephew will enjoy them very much."

"Yes, I think they will."

Robert edged his way nearer to the counter, pretending to be lost in the pages of the volume.

The plump woman paid for her selections and left.

Splashes of sunlight illuminated the interior. Robert peered up from the book and with a reserved shyness spoke, "Good afternoon, Miss."

She turned her head, smiled and replied, "Good afternoon, sir."

He laid down the volume and smiled in return.

The End

Leave a message for this story.

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* * *

She woke two days later in a hospital bed. Her roommate had awakened to the sound of her screaming, and dragged her away from her death grip on the books. As soon as she had lost contact she had passed out on the floor, and her frantic roommate had called an ambulance.

The doctors didn't know what was wrong with her, but the official diagnosis was "Exhaustion". The doctors frowned and shook their heads. ("Miss, I strongly recommend that you seek immediate drug counseling.") She had no explanation; her memory of what had happened was as blank and sterile as the hospital walls. But they allowed her to leave after another day of observation.

* * *

Returning to school, she found out that she had missed her sociology exam but had acquired a kind of notoriety on campus. It was several days later, in a burst of shock, that she remembered what had happened to her.

What she had willed so desperately had happened. Her sociology texts came rushing back to her, every word and picture perfectly etched in her memory. Yet she had not only absorbed the words and their meanings, but every nuance of the text, everything the author had meant, everything the author had been thinking but hadn't written down, every fact the author had learned as background material.

However, she also remembered the pain, the searing fiery pain which had roared up her fingertips and shrieked into her brain. How every word from every book had made its burning trip up through her arms to her mind. How her brain had burst open like an overcooked tomato to spill down her face in blistering tears.

Her body shuddered with just the remembrance of the pain. Nauseated, she resolved never to follow such a compulsion again.

Though sorely tempted at times, her resolve lasted the rest of her college career. She survived by taking only a few classes at a time and moving into her own apartment, where she could avoid any semblance of a social life. She steadily read her way through the college's library. The librarians knew her on sight, and let her bring food into the hallowed halls, out of worry that she might otherwise starve. She ate to stay alive, but an appetite greater than that for food drove her, an emptiness which couldn't be filled. At times, she'd have to grit her teeth and snatch her hands away, when they began that treacherous tingle. For however ravenous her desire for knowledge was, fear kept her from trying that other way.

Upon graduation, she began her career in the field in which she seemed most interested. After not too many years, she became one of the foremost sociologists of her day.

She was brilliant, in her own way. People would come to listen to her speak, to see words flow across her face like living creatures. She once gave a lecture at Harvard, where the audience was pin-drop silent for three and a half hours, despite a fire in the next building. She tried writing a scholarly text, but found she was only interested in the research. She knew what she saw and felt. She wanted to know what others wrote and thought and experienced.

Her teaching and lecture tours gave her little chance to read, and all spare reading time had

to be spent in keeping up in her field. She enjoyed reading about sociology–it remained her primary passion–yet she felt the call of entire worlds that remained untouched.

* * *

It wasn't until a quiet train ride late one night, alone in her compartment, that the emptiness finally caught up with her. She looked out her window and the world rushed by like all of the things she couldn't grasp, all of the books that she hadn't opened. The train pushed onward, and even if she were to grab the tracks with her hands and rip her fingernails bloody, she would not be able to stop it.

A book lay open on her lap, the first chapter barely breached. Steeling herself, she tried her painful skill again. The pain was all she had remembered, the searing, screaming pain. Yet she also remembered the river-full rush of words and ideas, the filling and overflowing of her aching need. She slept all of the next day, but seemed able to lecture by nightfall. This time she found it impossible to resolve never to do it again.

It tired her greatly, though, and she lasted for a time before trying it again, but found it harder and harder to resist.

* * *

After a while, she met and married a man who was good to her. He understood her love for books, and also never asked why one day every other month she would sleep for twenty hours, or why he would occasionally hear a muffled groan from her office.

Eventually, she had children who, while not angels, were reasonable facsimiles of ones. Yet they required her time, her energy, and while they gave back some joy and satisfaction of their own, her mind ached like an open, empty chasm. That hour she had saved for a new book would be swallowed up by sibling squabbles, dropped peanut-butter jars, and impromptu dance recitals.

* * *

Inescapably, her life got ever busier and she had less and less time to read. She certainly couldn't afford those twenty hour sleeps every other month.

Her girl's mind demanded books. But her children and responsibilities also demanded, and her deadlines and her work also demanded. If she was lucky, she was able to read a small book a week.

Eventually, gradually, she began to give in. If she was careful, she could manage to absorb a medium sized book with only a pounding headache for the afternoon. Category romances and schlock science fiction weren't too hard on her, but books which the author poured his or her whole soul and heart into would put her under for days. Now, however, she was able to recall instantly what she had absorbed. She reached out and gathered the words into her.

Her family, in alarm, assumed she was ill. She was pressured to see a doctor. ("Hon, you really should talk to a specialist.") She brushed them away in irritation. Finally she went into the hospital for a few days. They submitted her to a battery of tests, but at least it gave her a chance to catch up on some reading.

Realizing she risked exposure she scaled back, but continued to absorb books, about one per week. It was like a quick fix. Just to hold her over to this weekend or to that vacation day when she could get some real reading done.

She began to avoid bookstores, then malls entirely. Then she convinced her kids to get rides to school, because even the proximity of the shabby school library was painful to her.

* * *

Then one day, a seemingly normal day, something stirred impatiently inside her. It was her forty-third birthday. Maybe there was some significance in that date, she didn't know. She dressed, saw her husband off to work, and her kids off to school. Then she walked around her beautiful home, full of attractive furniture and art and the myriad personal things and sentimental possessions which described its residents. To her, however, it was a shell, a soulless place, for it was completely and utterly devoid of books.

Stopping abruptly in her pacing, she found herself in the living room, next to the cozy wood-burning fireplace. She examined herself in the mirror above the fireplace–a tall woman, very close to beautiful, intelligence written in her eyes and every line of her face. She reached up to touch the reflection and found it cold and the eyes empty, soulless, like the house.

She stood that way for a long while, or it might have been just a moment, then turned around and got her coat and purse.

Leaving a short note on her dresser, explaining nothing, she walked out the door and caught the next plane to Washington, D.C. On the flight she neither read nor thought, but gazed out the window as they flew towards the rising sun.

A few hours later she stood on the granite steps of the main building of the Library of Congress, and felt the welcoming weight of the massive gothic structure. Shading her eyes, she stepped through the heavy doors. A quick word with the desk librarian confirmed her credentials as a visiting scholar, doing a sociological study for the government.

She wandered for a while, absorbing the beauty and grandeur and silence that were everything a library should be, her eyes lingering on the texts engraved into the very walls. Her steps slowed as she passed through the special reading rooms, then she took a deep breath and plunged into the endless rows of the book stacks.

She walked quickly until she heard no other voices, heard no other footsteps, felt no other movements in the still air, thick with book dust. She found herself in a far corner, between the section devoted to parapsychology and the section about rats. The subjects didn't matter, they were books. She closed her eyes and paused, just for a moment. Not to regret or reconsider, just to savor the smell of newly printed books, the promise of unread words. Then she reached out wide and found a binding with each hand. She opened herself up, and her fingers began a warm tingle.

* * *

It was almost a week before they found her body. Security hadn't alerted the police for a couple days after her disappearance, being used to visitors who stayed for long periods of time. Upon arriving to search the building, the D.C. police discovered how truly gigantic a place the Library of Congress is. Yet when they had finally found her lifeless body, it was still standing, braced between two shelves, fingers clenched onto books on either side.

("Rigor Mortis?" "The de-humidified air?" "Look at her expression …") Her face was twisted up in a grimace that almost made her look like she was smiling. The cause of death was merely listed as "Systemic Trauma."

Soon, the press got a hold of the story and indulged in wild speculation, everything from vampire rats, to bioterror attacks, to roving clouds of static electricity. But sociologists, even famous ones, don't sell many newspapers, and before long even her name was only remembered by her family and in dry sociology texts.

The Library of Congress was cleaned and thoroughly sanitized. The staff dismissed the entire affair from their minds, and merely avoided that particular section. The Library returned to normal.

Every once in a while, when the air conditioner clicked on and stirred the stale dusty air between the bookshelves, a breeze moved across the books with a quiet rustle, like the sound of pages being turned.

The End

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Continued from page 23

Father, in one of his rare parenting moods, had taken Mary by the hand, guiding her from room to room as he explained the various works of art, the artists and their lives, their painting techniques, and so forth. Mary hadn't really been interested in the art itself, but was thrilled with the opportunity to spend some time alone with Father.

They came to one hanging in his study, entitled "Landscape Near Venice." The picture seemed to draw her in - a hypnotizing mixture of greens, blues and browns - she felt almost as though she could step through the frame and into the landscape.

"This is one of my favorites," Father confessed with a wink, "have you ever heard of Antonio Giaglo?"

Mary rolled her eyes. "Of course I have, Father, we studied him in art class. He's the one who killed himself by jumping off a bridge."

Father laughed, his blue eyes sparkling. "Yes, that is one of the things he's most well known for." He paused for a moment, and then became more serious. "Giaglo was really quite ill, you know - mentally ill. This picture was one he painted in an insane asylum in France."

"Really?"

"Yes, really. Do you also know that we are distantly related to him?"

"We are?" Related to Antonio Giaglo, however distantly, would certainly be a bragging point when school started in September.

"Well, that's what your Grandmamma always told me, and although I've never seen the family tree that proves it," Father winked, "I believe it just may be true."

They had moved on then, to other paintings by other artists, but she found her imagination drifting back to the Giaglo.

Mary jumped at the shrill ring of the phone, and she lunged across the desk to answer it, picking it up before it had a chance to ring a second time.

"Hello?"

"It's me." He sounded out of breath.

"Where are you?"

"I'm in my car. I just left the airport."

"Do you have them?"

"Them?" He chuckled on the other end of the phone. "So then, you know I've got more than one?"

"Of course I know - the whole world knows by now – it's been on the news all morning."

"Yeah, well, I'll be there in a little while. I just have a quick stop to make first." The phone went dead in her hand. She replaced the phone in its cradle and tapped her long, manicured fingernails on the desk.

Mary pulled a remote control out of the top desk drawer, pushing a series of colored buttons. A gas-fed fire sprung to life in the fireplace, and the doors on the oak console in the wall above it slowly slid open, revealing a large TV.

News reports she'd seen earlier stated that three paintings were missing – stolen from a museum in Amsterdam. Three of them. She twisted her hands together in nervous anticipation. They had already agreed on a price for "Cliff by the River", and whatever price he wanted for the other two, she would gladly pay as well.

It would be more than worth it, as far as she was concerned, worth any price. Giaglo's landscapes were so much more than just beautiful pictures.

They were doorways to another world.

Mary often wondered if Father had an ulterior motive that day when he'd given her the tour of his collection. Had he known the truth about the painting, known what it really was? Mary always

thought he did, even though she never got up the nerve to ask him directly. She fantasized that she and Father shared a special secret, meant only for the two of them.

Mary had first discovered the painting's secret shortly after Father had concluded their tour that long-ago evening. It had been past her bedtime, but Mary still tossed and turned under her thin sheet, unable to sleep as thoughts of the Giaglo constantly ran through her mind. Finally, she gave in, and crept from her bedroom, tip-toeing into Father's study. There, "Landscape Near Venice" hung silently, waiting.

She stood, staring at the picture for a long time, tilting her head this way and that, observing it from different angles. She reached out to touch the hardened oil on the canvas, and as her fingers lightly brushed it, the picture *moved* somehow, wavered under her touch. Like a reflection in a pool of water, and her fingers had created a ripple. Astonished, she drew her hand back.

Convinced she had imagined it, Mary reached out toward the painting again. As her fingertips touched it, the painting shuddered beneath her hand. She pushed her hand forward a little more, and her fingertips actually disappeared into the canvas. A tingling sensation ran up her arm, and a cold shiver rushed down her spine. Snatching her arm back, she held up her hand, inspecting it. She flexed her hand open, closed it, and then opened it again. She looked at the palm, turned it over, opening and closing her fingers.

Stretching out her arm towards the painting once again, this time she took a step closer and pushed her arm in up to the elbow. The tingling sensation returned, but she felt no pain or fear. She opened and closed the fingers of her invisible hand. She could feel the movement of her extremity behind the canvas.

She took a deep breath and moved forward, her entire head and torso passing through the image.

She felt herself *tugged* into the masterpiece, and opened her eyes to find herself standing within the picture, only it wasn't a painting anymore. Wide brush-strokes had been replaced with real grass, real stone, and real sky. She took a deep breath and smelled the fresh air, felt its crisp coolness within her lungs. She was in the land of the painting. It was real.

Panic overcame her. She twisted around, half-expecting to see the outline of the wooden frame that housed the painting. Instead, she saw only more landscape, hills rolling away from her, stretching to eternity. She spun around again, crying out in anguish. Where was she? How would she get home? Almost instinctively, she closed her eyes and pictured the painting in her mind, remembering every detail she could. *Tug*. She took a deep breath and the air around her seemed to shift, from autumn's chill back into the oppressing warm moistness of a July night. She had opened her eyes and found herself back in Father's study.

The bell on the office wall sounded. Mary leaned forward and pressed the red intercom button on her desk.

"Hello?"

"Buzz me in."

Mary pushed the buzzer, allowing the thief access to the building. She rose from her chair, sliding her feet back into her shoes, and strode to the front door of the loft.

She was taken aback for a moment by his appearance. Cousin Ed looked as though he hadn't slept in days. His pinstripe suit, normally crisply pressed, was a mass of wrinkles. He wore no tie, and the top three buttons of his white linen shirt were undone. His graying hair, wet from the rain, had a disheveled look about it, as though he had only run his hands through it to straighten it, and his face was shadowed with several days' growth. He held a large, black portfolio in one hand.

"You look dreadful." She motioned him in. "You had a rough trip, I take it?"

"Thanks, Cuz." His voice was thick with sarcasm. "It's always nice to get a compliment from a

lady."

She led him into her office and gestured to one of her visitor chairs. Mary sat down behind her desk and clasped her hands together. Outside the window, the rain came down harder, and off in the distance Mary saw a bright flash of lightning, followed by a low rumble. Ed laid the portfolio down on the desk in front of her and grinned.

"Is that them?" Mary could barely contain her excitement as she leaned forward towards her cousin.

He chuckled. "Well, I have the one that you originally wanted, 'Cliff by the River.' The other two I've got stashed for safekeeping until we can work out the details. "

Mary sighed. Of course he'd want to discuss prices for the other two, but that could wait. "Well, let me see it! I've been waiting a long time for this."

He unzipped his case and carefully slid the famous painting out. Mary drew a breath at its beauty. The deep, rich greens of the trees, the subtle yellows and browns of the cliffs, the blues of the water. She reached out as if to touch it, but then drew her hand back. Ed noticed the hesitation and gave an almost imperceptible nod, but said nothing. Mary looked up at him and grinned.

"It's fantastic! And the other two?"

"Ah, yes." He leaned back in his seat and steepled his fingers in front of his chest, tapping his index fingers together. "'The Mountain's Shadow' and 'Lake at Dusk.' They are equally astounding, I assure you, dear cousin."

"I'm sure." Mary's eyes narrowed into slits of suspicion. "I would very much like to add them to my collection. I'm sure we can settle on a fair price."

"Hmm, I'm sure." He stood up and walked over to the window, crossing his arms and looking out at the rain-darkened sky. "I know how much you like Giaglo's work." He turned around and faced her, a faint, knowing smile on his face. "It's interesting, actually, that you are so... specific about a particular artist. Especially an artist who is among the lesser well known. Why always Giaglo?"

She was startled by his question. She struggled for a response, but he'd caught her off guard. "My Father once told me that we are distantly related to him." She shrugged. "I guess you could call it a form of ancestor worship."

Ed laughed and nodded his head. Mary felt a moment of relief until he continued. "I've noticed something odd about Giaglo's art." He raised one eyebrow at her.

"Really?" Mary tilted her head to one side, her brow furrowed, "and what would that be?"

He strode back across the room and came behind the desk, standing next to her. He spun the unframed canvas around so it faced them.

"Watch this." He reached out and touched the surface of the inks, and Mary saw a faint distention amidst the colors. "That." He said, pulling his hand back. "Did you see it?" He turned and looked at her.

"See what? Have you been drinking again, Ed?" She was beginning to sweat a little, and wished she hadn't lit the fire earlier. She fought the urge to wipe the perspiration from her brow, not wanting to draw attention to her discomfort.

"Watch closely," he told her, as he reached out and touched the painting. There was a faint flickering among the inks. "You must have seen it that time."

Mary shook her head; all words caught in her throat.

Ed squinted at her, then reached out and snatched her wrist, pulling her towards the painting. She struggled to pull her arm back, but his grip was too strong. He shoved her fingers towards the image and they brushed against the paint. They both saw the movement as her fingers sank into the picture.

"Stop it!" she snarled, yanking her hand back.

Ed let go of her wrist and jerked his hand back. Sampson the Cat jumped up from his chair and scurried from the room, a tuft of white fur flying out behind him and fluttering to the carpet.

"Well I'll be…" He whistled low, under his breath. "How did you do that?" The look on his face was a mixture of amazement and awe.

She rubbed her wrist and glared at him, her eyes flashing with anger.

"Look, Mare, I think you better tell me what is going on here."

Remembering the other two paintings, her features softened, and she gave him a weak half-smile. "I suppose my secret's out." She took a deep breath and lied, "It's actually kind of a relief to have someone I can talk to about it, someone I know I can trust. I've kept it all to myself for so long, it's starting to weigh on me."

Ed nodded. "I know how it is - having something you can't talk to others about. It can be very stressful." Mary thought she detected a note of sarcasm in his voice. Ed looked down at the painting on the desktop. "What is it? Do you know how it works?" He moved back to the other side of the desk and sat down again, leaning forward with his hands clasped together.

She paused for a moment, hesitant to tell him more than he already knew. She had to stay on friendly terms with him, at least until he brought her the other two paintings. She took a deep breath and shrugged. "It's some kind of portal. I'm not sure how it works, although I have some theories, but that's about it." She felt like she was giving away a piece of herself in sharing her secret - Father's secret.

"A portal?" His tone said that said he didn't quite believe her, in spite of what he'd seen. "How do you know?"

"Well," she said, taking a sip of her cold tea, "let me ask you this. How did you come to find out about it?"

He looked up at the ceiling, running his hand through his thick hair and sliding his tongue across his cracked lips. "I noticed it when I stole the first one for you a couple of years back. I was cutting it out of the frame, and every time I touched the painting itself, it seemed to move. Not a lot, but a little wave or something - just like with that one." He gestured to the painting on the desk.

He shrugged and gave her a bashful grin, "I thought maybe it was the booze - I'd had a few before I went in, you know, to help keep me calm. I vowed I would never drink before a job again, and once it was over, I forgot all about it."

He paused for a moment, reaching up and tugging on his earlobe. "Then, in Amsterdam, while I was in the museum, the same thing happened when I was getting this one. This time I knew it was real, because I was completely sober. So I checked out a couple more Giaglos in the museum. They all had the same effect."

"Is that how you ended up stealing the other two?"

"Yeah, exactly, and I really took a big risk doing it - I had only timed it out for one." Again, his tongue came out and he licked his lips. "Listen, can I get a glass of water or something?"

"Sure," she smiled at him, "I could use some more tea anyway. I'll be right back." She picked up her mug off the desk and left the room, headed for the kitchen.

She couldn't allow this. What if he told someone? Ed was never one to pass up an opportunity for profit. Giaglo's World was her secret, hers and Father's, and she wouldn't, *couldn't,* share it with anyone else, least of all her scoundrel cousin. She pulled a glass from the cupboard and turned on the faucet. She needed to get the other two paintings from him, then she needed to come up with a way to keep him quiet.

When she went back into the office, Ed was standing in front of the desk, running his hand over the painting. She cleared her throat and he looked up, grinning as he took the glass of water from her and set it on the end table next to his chair.

"Watch this," he told her. "The longer I touch it, the stronger the waves become. Can you see it?"

Mary nodded in agreement. "It's possible that the more contact someone has with the paintings, the stronger its effects become."

"Is that how you made your hand disappear before?"

"Well, first of all, I didn't *make* my hand disappear, it happened on it's own. It was not a conscious decision on my part. And second of all, it didn't disappear; it went *through* the painting. I told you, it's a doorway."

"Have you ever gone all the way through?"

"Of course, I've done it many times."

"What's it like?"

"It's beautiful, just like the paintings, only the world goes on beyond what would be the edges of the paintings. I could enter this painting and walk over this hill," She pointed to a small slope painted on the edge of the canvas, "and find a village, or a man riding a horse, or just more hills." She shrugged. "I never know what I'll find until I go through and start exploring."

He looked at her with awe in his eyes, then whispered, "Do you think I could go through, too?"

"Since you apparently seem to have a bit of the ability, it's feasible that you could strengthen it and learn to pass all the way through, rather than just making the canvas ripple." She didn't like admitting that to him, but she was beginning to formulate a plan. "Or I could take you through…"

"You can do that? Take me through?"

She nodded.

"Would it be safe? I mean… could our molecules get scrambled together or anything? Have you ever taken anyone through before?"

Mary raised her eyebrows. "I think you've been watching too much television. No, our molecules will be fine. I haven't taken *a person* through before, but I have taken my cat on several occasions."

As if on cue, Sampson the Cat came around the corner, arching his back and rubbing it on the edge of the door.

"Well, *would* you take me through?"

He'd swallowed the bait. Now it was her turn to be smug. "I might take you through, but what, exactly, would be in it for me?"

He smiled. "Well, I do have those other two paintings..." his voice trailed off. It was precisely what she wanted to hear.

"So, I take you through, and you give me the other two paintings."

"Well, I'm not going to *give* you the other two, but I will sell them to you for a fair price."

"You would have sold them to me anyway."

"Well, I don't know, Mare. Now that I know what these paintings can do, what's to stop me from keeping them for myself? I could probably make myself pretty rich with a neat trick like this."

"Considering that half the world is looking for these paintings, I don't think publicizing the fact you have them would be such a great idea. I wonder how much prison time a valuable art theft would net you?" Mary twisted one of her black curls casually around her index finger.

Mary knew Ed well enough to know he would take the quickest, easiest way toward the money.

"Alright, I'll sell them to you for half the price I would have charged you otherwise."

She gave him a broad smile. "You've got yourself a deal." She slapped her palms down on the surface of the desk as she rose from her chair. "Go fetch the other two paintings, then come back and

I'll introduce you to Giaglo's World."

Ed hesitated, a small blush appearing on his cheeks. "All right, but first I want to see you do it. And… take the cat with you, if you don't mind."

"You don't trust me?" Her smile teased, chastised her cousin for his apparent concern. "Worried it's not safe?"

"I trust you… I just want to see it first. It's not every day I do something like this." He crossed his arms.

"Well then, if it will ease your mind." She strode across the room and picked up Sampson, who had sprawled out on the floor in front of the warm fire. Sampson's gentle nature allowed him to be carried with ease, and he nestled himself into the crook of Mary's arm, loud purrs erupting from his throat.

She went over to the picture on the desk and looked down at it, and then around at the other Giaglo's, perfectly aligned along the walls of the room, set at just the right height for her to easily travel through. She was undecided if she should go to one of the paintings already familiar to her, or if she should venture through to this new landscape.

The enticement of a new place seemed to call to her, and she made her decision. She reached down to the painting on the desktop. She felt the familiar tingling sensation, and then the *tug*, as she and Sampson were drawn into the unexplored world.

The cliff loomed in front of her, and the river rolled by in a tantalizing rush of sounds. The cool air smelled of springtime flowers, and she took a deep breath, relishing the freshness of it. How she would enjoy discovering this new place! But first, she had to do something about cousin Ed.

She closed her eyes and recalled the brushstrokes of the painting, remembering all the details in her mind. *Tug*.

Mary opened her eyes once again to see Ed, his mouth hanging open, standing in front of her. She stroked Sampson the Cat's back before setting him gently down in front of the fire.

Ed shook his head. "That was incredible. One second you were here, then you just... *vanished* into the painting."

"Well, I've never actually seen anyone else go through," Mary admitted, "but I imagine that must be what it looks like."

Ed still appeared flabbergasted, frozen by what he had seen. He hadn't yet closed his mouth. Mary cleared her throat to bring him back to reality.

"Umm, are you convinced now? The other paintings..."

"Yes." He shook his head. "Yes. Give me half an hour, and I'll be back with them."

As Mary closed the door behind him, she threw the deadbolt into place. She turned and leaned against the door, her thin form supported by the cold steel. A smile spread across her face. She would rid herself of Ed, and she knew exactly how she would do it. Father would have been proud of her ingenuity.

When Ed returned, his leather portfolio dangling from one trembling hand, Mary once again led him into her office.

He set the portfolio down on the desk, and slid out the paintings for Mary's inspection, straightening all three so that they lay in a perfect line.

Mary gasped at the sight of them, her voice barely a whisper. "They are incredible!" She was already beginning to plan where on the walls she would place each one. What incredible beauty and mystery lay behind each of these paintings? Soon she would have the time to explore, but first she had to take care of Ed. "Do you think you're ready to travel through?"

"What does it feel like? Does it hurt at all?"

Mary laughed - a deep, throaty sound that illustrated her absolute confidence. "No, it doesn't

hurt at all. In fact, it's rather pleasurable. Do you have any preference?" She gestured to the three paintings laid out on the desk. "One of these? Or perhaps one of the others?" She motioned to the paintings on the walls.

Ed hesitated for only a moment. "How about this one?" He pointed to "Cliff by the River", the image that she and Sampson the Cat had gone through earlier.

"Alright then." She held out her hand to him, "come and hold my hand, and we will travel into Giaglo's World."

Her cousin entwined his sweaty hand into Mary's cold fingers, and watched with wide eyes as she slid her hand towards the canvas. She heard Ed gasp just before they traveled through. *Tug*.

Mary opened her eyes and slid her hand from his. She watched as his eyes snapped open, taking in the scenery around him. He wiped his moist palms on the thighs of his pants, and his mouth formed a subtle O.

"Are we really in the painting?" His voice was barely a whisper as he stared at her, mouth agape.

"Well, look around you, what do you think?" The river rolled by, its swift current slapping the banks. The cliffs were peppered with outcroppings of vegetation, desperate to maintain their hold on its precarious surface. The air was cool, and smelled of water and flowers, with an underlying hint of mud. Frivolous clouds floated by in the blue sky above them.

"This is absolutely amazing." His face portrayed pure wonder as he turned a complete circle, surveying the landscape. "How can this be?"

"Isn't it lovely?"

"It's beautiful!"

Mary watched him spin around, his arms outstretched, then fall to the soft ground, giggling like a child.

"Where do you think we are?"

"In Giaglo's World." Mary's answer was pointed; he should have understood the obvious.

"But how do you think he did this? How could he have painted a doorway to this place?"

"I've actually given that a lot of thought." Mary sat down cross-legged some distance away from him, running her fingers through the soft grass. "I think it must have had something to do with his mental illness. Either the illness somehow allowed him access to this other world, or the access is what caused his madness. I'm not sure which."

"Hmmm. Can you imagine what people would pay to come to a place like this? What kind of fortune could be made from the tourism alone?"

That was exactly the kind of thinking Mary had feared Ed might take up. She had to get rid of him – permanently, and there was only one way to do it.

She rose from her place on the ground. "Excuse me, Ed, but I need to use the ladies room. I'll be back," she lied, closing her eyes and transporting back through the painting, leaving her cousin trapped forever in the other world. *Tug*.

Mary smiled. Sampson the Cat was again sprawled out in front of the fire, purring loudly in his contented cat's sleep. She skipped across the room, leaning over to pick him up, then cuddling him to her chest. "I did it Sampson," she whispered in the ear of the unconcerned cat, "I got rid of that sneaky cousin Ed once and for all! He's trapped there now, and he can't get back without me. Our secret is safe."

Still clutching the cat, she flopped down into her chair and looked at the paintings on the desktop. She'd have to remember not to go through "Cliff by the River" for a while - give Ed a chance to wander off into the countryside first - she didn't want to take the chance of running into him over there.

This called for nothing short of a celebration. Mary rose from the chair, setting Sampson down on the floor, and headed towards the kitchen for a glass of champagne. She was halfway to the office door when she heard a strange popping sound, and felt an odd chill in the air. She turned around just in time to see Ed materialize in front of her. He opened his eyes and looked around, his face covered with surprise, then breaking into a wide grin.

"Well I'll be… I did it. I got back on my own."

Mary fought to keep her features under control. She felt the tightening sensation of panic in her chest, every breath she drew increasing the painful grip that seemed to crush her lungs. He shouldn't have been able to get back.

She feigned happiness at his unexpected accomplishment. "Ed, I was just coming back to get you," she lied, "but it appears that it was unnecessary. You are quite amazing."

He shook his head, as if awed by his own success, then shrugged. "I sort of panicked when you disappeared," he explained, still grinning. "I worried that I was going to be stuck there forever. Then I just closed my eyes, pictured the painting in my mind, and suddenly I was back. It was that simple."

"Well, Bravo. It would appear my theory is correct then - this *is* something that can be strengthened and learned."

No! She couldn't very well abandon him in another world if he could weasel his way back into this one. How had he learned so quickly? He could barely make the images in the painting ripple, yet he could find his way back? Maybe coming back was easier, somehow. Maybe he just needed to be shown how to travel, and after that, it was like second nature to him. A new plan began to unravel in Mary's mind.

"I wonder, now that you've discovered how to come back, if you could also travel *through* the painting by yourself?"

Ed tilted his head and looked at the three paintings aligned on the desktop. He reached out and touched one, his fingers sinking into it. Gasping, He drew his hand back.

"Push it through further, see if you can travel all the way through."

Ed only hesitated for a moment before he pushed his hand in, and with another popping sound, vanished.

As much as she hated to do it, Mary knew she only had one option left. Her legs moved with long strides, carrying her across the room to the desk. In one graceful flow of movement, she tore the painting from the top of the desk and turned, heading back across the room towards the fireplace.

A moment of hesitation passed over her before she willed her arm to toss the painting directly into the fire. The flames slowly licked, and then consumed the canvas, its edges curling and twisting in the heat, bright orange and blue sparks flying upward into the darkness of the chimney. Mary watched with her arms crossed in front of her chest, until all that remained of the painting was a scattered pile of soot and ash.

She had destroyed the doorway, making sure Ed couldn't return to this world. Her secret was hers again, and hers alone. Now there was no one who could reveal the knowledge - at least no one in this world.

The End

Leave a message for this story.

Continued from page 25

"I... I..." Torrance looked around the tunnel, down to the rats. "I barely remember a thing. My name: Torrance. Your name." Torrance looked down to Finias' shoes. They were simple, but the black shine showed clearly. "You... You're a shoeblack, aren't you?"

Finias stared, a dirt-smudged glare riding his face like he was as confused as Torrance was.

"You are! I remember my first shine with you. Please, these ropes hurt terribly."

Finias took a step closer, hesitated, and bent down to set the lantern on the cement. He untied the bindings around Torrance's legs; blood rushed into his extremities, sending an untold number of pinpricks through his feet. Finias moved to do the same to his hands, and in little time Torrance was free. He took a moment to shake his legs and hands, wishing the sudden pain away.

When he turned back to Finias, the boy had shifted over to the metal grate to sit above the sewage. The lantern sat next to him, lighting not very much at all.

"Tell me about that first shine." Finias shrugged. "Might help."

Torrance wanted to ask to leave first, but felt horribly woozy from the bump to his head. He felt like even a few steps and he'd fall right in the muck below. The lamp gave Torrance a meager sense of safety, so he sat down and dangled his feet over the edge like Finias. It felt good just to be able to rest properly.

"Things are starting to clear a bit. I was heading for a play--near Covent Gardens. It was almost dusk, and you were ready to wrap up."

* * *

Torrance walked along the street, seeing a tall shoeblack duck under a blue and white striped awning and around a corner; another was putting away his horsehair brush and pot of blacking. Torrance looked closely before approaching. There was no shield on the box, so the boy was unlicensed. A good enough place to start, he thought.

"Wait, boy. One more? Do you have time?"

The young man turned around, a flat expression on his face. "Aye, governor, I do. Let's get 'em up, then."

A pewter-grey foot pedal sat atop the shoeblack's shine box. Torrance stepped forward and placed one boot on top of it. The shoeblack wiped the boot clean before opening the pot and smearing the thick, black cream liberally over the toe and sides.

"Name's Torrance."

"Finias."

"How's business been?"

"Fair to middling. What you here for, then? A play?"

"Hmm? Oh, yes. 'St. George and the Dragon' is playing at the Adelphi. Have you been?"

Finias looked up with a scowl before returning to his work.

Torrance said, "Sorry. You live nearby?"

"Not by a long shot." Finias finished spreading the black and started buffing with a thin, stained cloth. "Got to keep on the move these days, if you get my meaning."

"I've heard. There's been some friction, hasn't there? Brigades versus unlicensed?"

"Has, but I don't know I'd call it friction on their end. With the bobbies in their back pocket, it's a bit rough-and-tumble for us. Them Brigade boys sit back and let the top hats do it all for them. We gotta fend for ourselves."

He switched to the horsehair brush to bring out a lustrous shine from his boots. It was the first shine the boots had ever had, and the transformation made them look nearly new.

"Who are 'the boys'?" Torrance asked.

Finias gave that same scowl without looking up. "Just the boys. Like me. Next boot, governor."

Torrance switched to the other boot and Finias began the same way. Up the street another shoeblack, perhaps only nine or ten, walked towards them.

"G'day, Fin. How'd it go?"

"Not done, yet, Kerry. Off with ya."

The boy looked chagrined and continued up the street, giving Torrance an apologetic glance. Finias continued the shining, working with practiced efficiency. In no time, he was done with the second boot.

"Right, then. Shilling, if you please."

Torrance stepped back and pulled up his striped wool trousers to get a better look at the shine. They shone even in the meager light of the dying day and the few gas lamps that had been lit. Torrance reached into his pocket and grabbed two coins. "An extra, for the good shine."

Finias held out his hand, but dropped one of the coins. It rolled along the sidewalk before dropping onto the cobbled street. Finias walked over and reached down to grab it, but before he could a brown rat scurried out from the sewer grate and picked it up in his mouth.

"Give it," Finias said. The rat paid no attention to his demands and ran right back down the grate. Finias dove at the thing, reaching his arm far down to grab for it.

"Stop. Please, here." Torrance handed out another shilling.

"No, governor. I won't be taking three for that shine. Was my fault, see?" Finias looked most angry as he stood up, but he wouldn't take his eyes off the grate. "Foul rat."

"Well, thanks just the same. Good shine. Where can I find you again?"

"Hereabouts for another week. Maybe less. Depends, I suppose."

"On what?"

"Bobbies."

* * *

"My God, I'm a policeman," Torrance said, shaking himself from the story. He was so lost in it that the return to the dank smell of the sewer was a depressing shock.

"Are you, then?"

"I am. I... I came to you to find something. News, I suppose."

"News."

"Yes. News of the war. There were three dead on the licensed shoeblacks' side, and more on the unlicensed. It was getting out of hand."

"Didn't come dressed, though."

"Hmm? Oh. No, I was undercover."

"Why?"

Torrance rummaged through his memories, finding little to work with. "I can't remember. I only know I wanted to meet someone from the unlicensed crew. Legions, they were calling themselves. I remember following you that same night. You packed away your gear and you jumped in after that rat. My God, why did you do that?"

"Took my shilling."

Torrance laughed at the simplicity of it. The echoes traveled further and further down the tunnel.

Finias pulled his legs up and wrapped his arms around his knees. "What else you remember?"

Torrance was grateful for having some help in remembering, even if it was in a strange place. He still felt light-headed, so leaving could wait a bit longer. Soon, he told himself. Soon they would get out of this nose-assaulting darkness.

"I didn't see you again that night, but I came back, got a few more shines from you. Until you did it again. I was watching you after I got the shines. Must have been interested in the shilling incident. You went down the sewer again, near the Tower."

Finias looked to the ceiling, and an abrupt understanding seemed to dawn on him. "I remember."

"You were talking with that rat."

* * *

Finias bent down and looked at the brown rat that had run up to his box. It sat atop the shoe pedal and looked at Finias, moving his front paws over his ears and mouth. Finias sat there, doing nothing it seemed, until he picked the rat up and set him aside. He moved quickly, hiding his shoebox and walking to the street, where a wide grate sat.

Finias dropped to the street and poked his head and chest into the grate. The boy's legs and feet slipped down just as fast as the top half of him had. Lickety-split, he was down the sewer. No leads had come up regarding the war, and though this would surely uncover none either, Torrance was curious beyond belief. Where did the boy go?

Torrance walked over, looking along the street. A few stray dogs were licking something that he'd rather not investigate, but no one else was present. He ran over to the grate, and thought he could just fit through. Without the coat, though. He needed to be as thin as possible for this. He stripped his coat and hid it behind an old shop sign, discarded in front of the now-empty store. Torrance returned to the grate, flattened himself on the street, and wiggled forward.

The thought of getting stuck tore at his mind relentlessly, making the shift down the shaft that much more difficult. He scraped his stomach and felt a button pop free. What am I doing? He asked himself. I'm pleasing the chief, that's what I'm doing. Bootlicker.

After two more heaves with his arms, his hips scraped through, and he could grab the iron at the side of the grate. He shimmied sideways and found purchase with his legs. Torrance dropped down and saw iron handholds fixed to the wall. He took these down until he stood on the lip of the sewer tunnel. The light filtering down from the grate lit only the immediate area, but he could see the tunnel leading the same direction as the street above. Which way had Finias gone?

Torrance took out a miniature lantern--no bigger than an apple core--from his pants pocket and struck a lever at the side of it. Sparks flashed in the tiny enclosure and lit the wick. He quickly adjusted it so only a meager beam of yellow light leaked out from the front of it.

Torrance listened intently for Finias, but heard nothing. After a minute of waiting, he was forced to guess. Towards city center, then.

The light allowed Torrance to stay on the walkway, and little else. His hearing took over though, and he started to hear more from the foul-smelling surroundings: his own scraping footsteps, dripping water, the flow of the sewage stream next to him, the occasional squeak of a rat.

He continued for some time, unsure how long in the monotonous darkness. A sewer connection came, and Torrance was forced to choose again. May as well stay consistent. The center of London it was.

After passing a darkened passageway to his right, Torrance stopped rigid. There were voices

from that tunnel. It wasn't another sewer pipe. It was simply a bare, dry tunnel. Torrance, fearing discovery, was afraid to use the lantern to look for any signs indicating the tunnel's purpose.

He set the lantern down outside the tunnel, pointing the way he had come. After a deep breath, he took cautious steps down the blackened opening, feeling his way along the damp wall. He could see no light, but the voice came clearer as he went.

"You got it? A key, right? Like this. Three buildings down. Second story."

Torrance felt his way forward until the wall fell away on his right. The tunnel turned that direction and dim light shone from a doorway further ahead--perhaps ten yards on the left.

"No, you blighter. Second story. Should be gone, right? Easy to get."

Torrance grew nervous, but he recognized Finias' voice. Who in Hell was he talking to? He edged his way towards the door, bolder now that he could actually see it. He crept along the edge until he was nearly there, but feared turning his head around the corner.

"Bugger the maid. You'll scare her to Sunday, now get your sorry self up there. Half hour, no more."

Torrance turned the corner. A small room was revealed, with dozens of black pipes and meters. Red-painted handles were connected to various pipes, some large, some small. Two lanterns lit the room. There were several chests, rather small, but each was filled with coins. Filled to the brim!

All of this barely registered with Torrance, though. He couldn't take his eyes off of Finias. He knelt in the center of a room ... talking to a rat. The rat was on its hind legs and used its forepaws to rub wiry whiskers and large ears. It wiggled its nose a bit and jerked around nervously, like any rat might.

"Just the key, I said. No coins."

The rat did nothing different, but Finias stared at it intently.

"It's time. Go."

The rat ran to a pipe and scampered up. It took to another and in no time was near the boarded white roof. It dashed into a hole and was gone.

Torrance jerked himself back into the tunnel when he saw another rat scamper past. He plastered himself against the wall, breathing heavy.

"What's this now?" Finias said. The pitch of his voice had risen from his previous conversation. His voice dropped to a near whisper then, but in the hard sewers Torrance heard each word clearly. "Where. Show me."

Torrance ran. He dashed down the corridor, feeling on his left for the return to the main sewer branch. He heard Finias exit the room behind him.

"Hey there. Stop!"

It made him run all the faster--why, he wasn't sure. The boy was just a shoeblack, for God's sake.

But run he did.

Torrance found the main tunnel and grabbed at his lantern for all he was worth. He didn't hear any pursuit, but he ran all the way to the sewer grate.

* * *

"You can talk to those things," Torrance said. Suddenly, the sewers seemed much more familiar than when he had woken up.

"Aye, a bit."

"What... What were you doing there?"

"Might ask you the same."

"I... I was just trying to find out more. I had to stop the war."

"You mean stop the Legion from gettin' too high, don't you governor?"

"Well. The licensed pay fees. They have a lot of power."

"You give 'em power, bobby." For the first time, Finias showed emotion. Petulant anger lit his face as he dropped his legs to hang over the edge of the metal walkway.

"I don't. I..."

"Why were you there, then? Why follow Finias? He never hurt no one, did he?"

Torrance's mind was too fuzzy. He didn't even know the full answer himself. "I was sent there. The chief wanted things calmed down."

"Calmed down or shut down?"

"The Legion were organizing. It was creating too much of a disturbance."

"Found me one more time, din't ya, Torrance?" His anger hadn't cooled in the least. "Tell me 'bout it."

His head was clear, but Torrance was getting an uncomfortable feeling. It was similar to that first time in the sewers with Finias. An indescribable fear of this young boy gripped him. Tell him the story. Tell him and get out of here.

"I heard news of the war. It was coming to a head and we needed to clear things up."

* * *

Torrance walked down the street, trying his best to avoid the market's early traffic. He dodged around a keysmith pushing his jingling cart along the middle of the cobbled street. "Keys! Keys made here!"

Where was the boy? He had lost him. Torrance sped past two men in black top hats, trying to look like he wasn't walking fast. Keep calm, Torrance. He's there--just have to find him.

He walked to the next cross street near Brown's Bakery, and looked to his left. Dozens of milling people: corseted women in wool skirts, men in cravats and dark suits, children being towed. Not a shoeblack in sight. Torrance turned to the right and darted his view up the street, searching quickly. There he was. Kerry O'Shea. Too young to get pulled into the fighting, but old enough to know a thing or two. Torrance had to get something out of him today.

Torrance had heard rumors of a war brewing. Finias was involved for sure, but Torrance was unsure just how much. His main goal was to keep the peace, but Torrance had come to like the young boy. He was getting a bad shake from the rest of the police, as the non-Brigades always did. Torrance was still undercover but that was about to change. He had to confront Finias, and the leader of the unlicensed boys, before people died.

Kerry set his shoeblack box down and began talking with a patron. Torrance sped down the street and turned to the boy, taking his arm.

"Hey, I was getting a shine."

"Not anymore."

"Now leave him alone," the man said.

Torrance pulled his coat to the side, revealing his badge. "Bugger off," he said, giving the man a shove. When he turned back Kerry was gone, tearing down the street.

Torrance pursued. He nearly caught up three times, but Kerry was slippery. He dodged under carts filled with wares, through tight crowds, barely rustling their coats, turning tightly when

Torrance came too close. He ran down an alley and Torrance followed. The boy was nearly to a fence when he tripped in some mud, fell hard on the wet dirt, and knocked his wool cap off his blonde head.

Torrance caught up and picked him off the ground. "Easy now, O'Shea. I just want to talk things through a bit."

"Bugger off, then. Nothin' to say."

"Nothing? Do you know what's happening tonight?"

Kerry looked up at him obstinately. But there was fear, too.

"Finias is going to get killed, that's what. Word's out, O'Shea. We're not deaf. The war's gotten too heated. People will die if this meeting goes through. I'm only trying to stop that from happening."

Kerry worked his jaw back and forth, and glanced back up the street.

"Do you want them dead?"

"Well, no. 'Course I don't."

"I only want to know where they're preparing. I want to talk to them. That's all."

"That's all?"

"That's it."

Kerry shook his head before speaking. "Piccadilly. Meeting behind Flannery's Tavern."

"You're sure?"

"Bugger yourself if you don't believe me."

"Who's leading the Legion?"

"Naw, that's too much." Kerry tried to shake his arm free, but Torrance held him tight.

"I have to know who I'm dealing with. It'll make things go smoother."

Kerry looked at his feet, and Torrance was unsure if he would tell. "Randolph," he said quietly.

"Randolph? Randolph the shoeblack?"

"'Course. Who else?"

"Come on. Randolph can't count to eleven with his pants down."

"He's changed since summer. Been real bright since then. Got them Brigade boys on the run."

Torrance wasn't sure what to believe, but Kerry seemed to be telling the truth. "Thanks, O'Shea. You're saving lives."

Kerry ignored Torrance, and began wiping himself off.

Torrance considered getting help, but it didn't feel right. The timing was off for one. By the time he gathered men this meeting might be over and the war begun. Besides, Finias was in there, and he wanted to get the boy help, not see him thrown in jail merely for opposing the Brigade. The presence of a policeman would most likely break the meeting up nicely.

Torrance took a horse-drawn cab to Piccadilly, exiting a few blocks away from the tavern. He walked along the streets, which were clearing now that a grey drizzle had started to fall. He buttoned his overcoat up tight, and walked down a few alleys until he approached the back of Flannery's.

A thin alley between two redbrick buildings ran along the back, and a meager stream of rainwater fell on the far side into a grate. Torrance shivered from the memories. Up the street, near the forest-green tavern, stood Randolph, alone. Randolph glanced up the street, then the other way. A few seconds later, the ritual began again. He had the same face that he always had, rough shaven and slightly slack on the right side. A brown and yellow cap sat not-quite-straight on Randolph's head.

Torrance walked across the street after a young couple passed him, not attempting to hide

from Randolph. The big man saw him and tried to turn the other way. Torrance walked right up to him.

"What's doing, Randolph?"

He turned slowly to look at Torrance. "Nuffin', Torrance. Nuffin' at all."

"Ah, I think there is, good man. You're here for a reason, right?"

"No, just standin'."

Torrance had to laugh. This man running the unlicensed shoeblacks? No, not a chance.

"I'm looking for Finias. I think he may be in danger."

Randolph ignored Torrance and examined the street, looked at the red wall on the far side, everywhere but up the thin alley to Flannery's. "Can't help you, then."

"You can, Randolph. You can help me a great deal. I only want to get Finias out of trouble and stop this war from getting out of hand."

"Can't help you, Torrance. Best leave, see? I can't let you.... Look, just go."

Torrance took a step up the alley, and Randolph moved to block him.

"Go. You can't--"

Torrance hit him swiftly in the stomach and Randolph pitched forward, exhaling loudly. Torrance removed a small black cudgel from his belt, and brought it down on the back of Randolph's head. Randolph dropped immediately to the ground.

"Sorry, good man." Torrance pulled the limp body of Randolph near some bushes and continued down the alley, sidling up to the end to look at the back of the tavern.

The tavern and the neighboring buildings enclosed a small courtyard. A handful of rats milled around a metal garbage bin. To the right of the tavern's rear exit lay two cellar doors. One was pulled wide. Torrance crept up to the edge of it and looked down--just stairs down to a flagstone floor. He took the stairs and peered low to see what he could. An empty corridor led ahead, and an open doorway sat on the right.

Once reaching the cellar, he could hear voices. More rats scuttled behind two shovels and an ancient wooden ladder lying prone against the left wall. Three black ones waltzed inside a whitewash pail. Torrance slid along the wall until he got closer to the doorway.

"Well, let's say I don't deal with messengers. I want to talk to your leader or no one."

"You deal with me, Burgess, and that's that. We make a deal, you can talk to the boss, right? Not before."

"Ah, you're playing a game that's too big for you, Fin."

Now that Torrance was closer, he could see further into the gloom down the hall. The black maw of an open doorway lay at the end, but many, many tiny black eyes met his gaze as he watched. Only a few squeaks escaped the little beasts, but there was no doubt. An untold number waited there. For what? Torrance asked himself.

"How many do you have? Fifteen? Twenty? We're one hundred sixty strong, boy. Why don't you join us? We can work together and end these foolish hostilities."

"You call 'em foolish? You remember Socks? Old man killed by your boys a year back."

Torrance dared a glance around the corner. In a stockroom filled with various jars and dingy tins, Finias talked with a burly man. Torrance knew him immediately. This was Johnathon Burgess, Big John, leader of the Licensed Shoeblack Brigade. He wore a respectable wool suit, and a brown bowler covered his graying black hair. Big John towered over Finias like a great oak stealing light from a young sapling. Behind the two of them, a street tough picked at his teeth with a grubby fingernail. The tough looked at the jars along the far wall, seemingly indifferent to the conversation.

Torrance wasn't sure whether to step in, yet. Perhaps this meeting would end in peace and he

could just walk away and catch Finias later for a talk.

"Socks was getting too big for his britches, just like your boss is, Fin. Just like you are."

"No, that's where you're wrong. Socks was trusting. Too trusting. Socks was like a father, he was. You get that, Burgess? You killed my father."

Big John chuckled in scathing mirth. Even Torrance was incensed at the sounds coming from the big man, but Finias was furious.

"You just bought your death with that laugh, governor."

Torrance was about to break in, but caught a blur off to his right. Torrance turned to find Randolph barreling down on him with a spade shovel.

"Look out Finias!" Randolph cried.

Torrance tried to raise his arms in time, but Randolph was just too close. A horrendous crunch sounded in Torrance's ears and blackness came.

* * *

Torrance stared into the smelly murk below. He reached a shaking hand to the tender wound where Randolph had struck him with the shovel. Fear gripped his heart from his now all-too-clear memories. He dared a glance over at Finias; the boy scowled back.

Torrance shifted uncomfortably on the cold cement. "You're the leader, aren't you?" It wasn't really a question.

"That's right, governor. Of more than you remember. The Brigades are run by me, now."

"They accept you?"

"No, they accept Randolph."

"Randolph can't lead."

"I lead him, see? Randolph is--" Finias squinted in thought, "--like a rat in many respects. The ones that matter to me, anyway."

God, the boy controlled Randolph! Torrance swallowed heavily and glanced around. Several rats rubbed against his thighs and back as he dangled his legs over the edge.

"What say we get going, Finias?" Torrance hoped he sounded convincingly friendly. He wondered how quickly he could stand and grab Finias.

As if hearing his thoughts, Finias stood in a blink and snatched the lantern. "Good idea. I think I will get going. I have to thank you, though, governor. I needed to find out who leaked that meeting. Kerry's a good boy, but I can't have none of that in my crew."

Finias turned and walked across the metal grating just as a rat sunk its teeth into Torrance's hand. Torrance yelled.

"Finias, please, I need a bit of that light." Three rats clawed their way up Torrance's back, and another tore into his leg. A dozen scrambled around his hips and waist by the time he stood to fling some of them off.

"Finias, please! I came to save you!"

Torrance ran forward; if he could reach Finias, he could force him to call them off. Dozens more clambered up Torrance's leg as the bobbing light grew dimmer. Torrance lost sight momentarily as a rat clawed across his face. His screams ran up and down the sewer, climbing higher and more desperate.

A heavy splash followed and water thrashed. The thrashing and screaming gradually eased, until the relative silence of the sewer reigned once more.

The End

Continued from page 31

that is. I haven't done much for ... oh... about two thousand years. And these days I certainly don't take on any personal cases. So you can relax, Richard, and call me Mick." The Devil extended his hand.

Awed and a little terrified, Richard Houseman leaned across the low table between the two chairs and shook hands with Satan. His own palm was warm and moist, while the Devil's cool flesh brushed his with the softness of chamois, not the least bit calloused or horny as he expected. Sinking ruefully back into his lounge chair, Richard furtively counted his fingers and wondered if they would suddenly go on a crime spree. Consciously keeping his hand where he could see it, he peeked at the dark man who sat unconcerned, reading a paperback book, *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*. On the table lay *The Seven Habits Organizer*.

Richard fidgeted. The Devil had arrived without fanfare and now lounged next to him, seemingly oblivious of his presence. If he had come to trade a wall-street job for Richard's soul, he wasn't doing a very good job of it. Richard expected smoke and fire and brimstone. Black magic. Misshapened servants sneering maleficently. At the very least there should have been a thunderclap and eerie lighting and a smoldering contract.

Richard smirked. He could have argued the contract, inserted new clauses, and then had the whole thing thrown out of court on a technicality of illegal interstate commerce. After he got his position in the law firm, of course.

His smile became a frown. No Halloween special effects and no contract meant no job. Disillusioned at the Devil's lack of effort, Richard wondered briefly if he could force Satan into a trade.

Trying to get his foot in the door, he said, "I guess you read my mind to learn my name."

"Nah. It's monogrammed on your Croakies," Satan drawled, indicating the turquoise band attached to his glasses. "Hey, want a beer?"

Wishing to keep his mind clear in case of negotiations, Richard shook his head. The Devil returned to his book.

Richard waited for the Devil to make a move. Minutes passed. Disillusionment gave way to indignation.

"So," he chided, "what brings you to Palm Beach if you're not buying souls? Cocaine? Murder? General mayhem?"

The Devil laughed, the sound like soft waves on a sand beach at sunset. "You American blokes are so funny. I'm here just visiting. I haven't been in Florida since the Cuban boat lift."

"Ah, 1981."

"Spanish-American War," the Devil corrected him. "Now that was a real corker. If you looked Spanish, the Floridians would have remembered the *Maine* right up your arse." He laughed heartily. "But that's all behind now. Palm Beach is a quiet, peaceful little town. A nice place to relax, eh, mate?" He tipped a cold Fosters Lager, which had not been in his hand earlier, and took a long pull. "Ahh, that feels grand," the Devil said delightedly.

Richard sat back dumbfounded. South Florida was a Mecca of vice and corruption, and the Devil sat poolside with a cold beer, not even leering at the semi-nude women wearing thongs, tanning themselves.

"That's it!" Richard exclaimed angrily. "I'm willing to sell my soul, but you can't be bothered because you're on vacation!"

His voice carried loudly above the sounds of fun in the pool. Guests slewed around in their chairs again and glared at him. A well-muscled hotel waiter in a starched, short-sleeved white shirt, black bow tie and vest, wearing a skimpy bathing suit instead of pants, appeared suddenly and said

to the Devil, "Mick, is this guy bothering you?"

"Nah. He's a good bloke, really."

"Just call if you want us to remove him." The waiter frowned at Richard and then walked away.

Subdued, Richard pointed at the waiter's retreating back and said, "He didn't even notice your . . . your . . . uh . . ."

He sputtered to silence, embarrassed to point out the Pan-like protuberances that rose out of the Devil's scalp just above the ears.

"Horns," the Devil said wearily. "They aren't abhorrent, you know. They're warm and even a bit soothing to the touch and covered with a soft down like a deer's in the spring. They're made from the same keratinous material that makes up your hair and nails, or antlers and hooves."

"You have . . ."

"No, I don't have cloven hooves! Nor do I sport a tail either." He tapped his horns. "These are mostly ornamental. They give me a sort of rakish appearance. Don't you think?"

"Sure. But the waiter didn't even see them."

"I told you, not many people do. It's a trick of the light, and besides most people don't have the talent for it. Frankly I'm surprised you did. What are you? A lawyer or something?"

Richard turned pale. A shaft of ice stabbed through his testicles into his stomach. "What do you mean?" he asked scared to death. "I am a lawyer. Or almost. I'm a student. My third year."

"It's just a joke. Relax."

Richard breathed a loud sigh of relief.

"I... I thought being a lawyer made me specially able to see you or something."

"Nah. Some people see me just fine. Others wouldn't recognize me if walked into a church in a red suit and breathed fire. In fact, I once gave a thousand dollars to one of your TV Evangelists and told him he should start a 'Spank a Gay for Jesus' campaign. He thought it a grand idea."

The Devil laughed loudly and no one paid him any attention. He drained his Fosters, set the can down, and signaled one of the poolside waiters for another. "Sure you won't join me?"

"No!"

"Suit yourself."

A waiter appeared magically at Mick's elbow with a frosted can, no glass. He had an elfin face with ears just slightly pointed. His smile revealed incisors, tapered to sharp points. The Devil flipped him a Krugerrand, which vanished into thin air and left a dull outline in the waiter's vest pocket before he turned away.

The law student stared fearfully at the attendant as he walked off.

"Is he one of your minions?"

The Devil blinked.

"Huh?"

"You know, one of your followers."

"Marvin?" Mick snorted in disgust. "He worked for me once, but he discovered he could make more money working the hotel circuit so he quit a few decades back. It's hard to keep good help now-a-days."

Richard shook his head. Maybe he should have that beer. It seemed inconceivable that the Devil sat next to him and no one else in the place even suspected. Waiters treated him like some big shot tycoon on vacation. The whole scenario seemed unfair . . . un-American . . . perhaps even illegal. Richard's law training asserted itself once more. There might be some legal angle he could pursue to force the Devil into giving him a spot in that law firm, full partner even.

"So you're here just for a little vacation," he said probing for some kind of weakness.

"Right."

"But, but... you're the Devil. Beelzebub, Satan, the Tempter, Evil One, Shaitan, the Thief of Souls . . ."

"Call me Mick."

"You have an image to uphold. Shouldn't you be about the world tempting good people, fanning fires, fomenting rebellions, stealing babies. Buying souls, like mine, I might add."

"Nah. I'm retired. I made a killing during the Crusades and invested it with some eager Italian bankers. Later I switched to the Rothschilds. In the nineteenth century I backed Disraeli and in the last century the U.S. I've done all right. Must be worth at least a half a trillion or so by now."

"So you don't trade souls for anything anymore?"

"Don't need to. Don't want to," the Devil answered with finality.

Richard stared wistfully at the tanning beauties.

Mick smiled and relented.

"Well, occasionally I trade immortality for souls just to keep my hand in. Never know when you're going to have to fall back on sales to make ends meet. But I only do it every once in a while." He sipped his Fosters appreciatively.

"How long?" asked Richard.

"How's that, mate?"

"How long since you traded a soul for immortality?"

The Devil sat stiffly back in his chair and studiously read his book.

"C'mon. How long?"

"I really don't wish to discuss it," the Devil said through clenched teeth.

Richard pressed him.

"One year... a decade."

"It's none of your business."

"Why? Are you afraid?" Richard sneered. "Don't think you can cut a good deal any more?"

The Devil made a face like a Hindu at a steer roast. His dark eyes turned freakishly violet; anger sent lurid sparks flashing deeply within the pupils. And then he was Satan, ready to steal a human soul and send it shrieking into the fires of the underworld.

Richard recoiled. Yet at the same time he felt strangely drawn into those violent orbs. He knew that once he fell into them, he would drown and never come out again. He gulped and mouthed a silent prayer. He could feel the heat of hell's kitchen already.

A loud whoop of laughter distracted the Devil and Richard tore his eyes away. He glanced toward the deep end of the pool where several of the tanning beauties were gathered near one man.

The Devil let out a longsuffering sigh and gave the law student a resigned look. His terrible eyes shone normally black again.

"Take the bloke over there with all the sheilas," the Devil said. "He's Geoffrey Fitzpercy, Earl of Essex and Justiciar of England under King John. I traded him immortality for his soul, oh around 1212 A.D. Right after Magna Carta."

"That's impossible," Richard said amazed. "Why he'd be over eight hundred years old and he looks only thirty-five to forty."

"Spot on, mate," the Devil answered gloomily.

"How long does he have?"

"Eh?"

"When will he die?"

The Lord of Darkness nearly choked on his Fosters.

"Never if I can help it!"

"What do you mean?"

"That black-hearted, Irish Bastard tricked me and inserted into the fine print that when he died I would give up my life on Earth and go to hell with him for friendship."

"For friendship?" Richard asked, stunned that the Devil would sign any deal in the name of friendship.

"It sounds a lot more majestic and lofty in Gaelic," the Devil explained. "Like striding into a Dublin pub and exhorting your fellow Irish to free Ireland forever from the bloody English."

"But, going to hell shouldn't bother you so much. I mean, you're Lord of the Underworld, after all."

The Devil shuddered, made the sign of the cross and kissed his thumb.

"It's a title only. Nobody wants to go to hell. It's a foul and nasty world. Spending any time there is worse than reading a Kafka novel in a Bergman movie, while listening to a radio talk show host."

The Devil took a long pull from his Fosters.

"That bloke is going to live as long as possible, if I have to tie him down to keep him out of mischief."

The man the Devil indicated left the bathing beauties, heading toward Mick and the young law student. The hair on his chest and arms glistened reddish gold in the sun. His face was round and tanned, his muscles tight and well sculpted, though he was a little on the short side. He grinned at the Devil.

"Hi, Milt. Wonderful weather we're having. Don't you just love Palm Beach—the food, the women, the sand."

The Devil looked at him sourly.

"My name isn't Milt, and stay out of the sun, you might get melanoma or something."

"Aw, Milt, you're such a comedian." The man laughed and sauntered off.

Baffled by the exchange, Richard said, "I don't understand why you're worried. After all, you gave him immortality. He can't die can he?"

"Well, mate, first of all, if it were just a simple sword thrust or a pistol bullet or draught of poison or hangman's noose—you get the picture—it would be easy to patch him up. Hell, even if a tank ran over him, I could help him. But say some of the really nasty characters in this town decide to burn him and spread his ashes to the four winds, there wouldn't be enough left to piece back together."

"But... shouldn't he be indestructible?"

"What about entropy, you ninny? Didn't you study physics and the natural laws of the universe?"

Richard shook his head.

"Well take my word for it, nothing lasts forever. What kind of education are they teaching kids now-a-days anyway?"

Richard sat up straight and answered huffily, "A pretty good one I think. Computers, business, *ethics*. Everything to make a good living at."

The Devil scoffed.

"Kid stuff. You wouldn't last a day where I went to school."

"Well, at least we no longer believe the Earth is flat, or that God took a rib from Adam and created Eve and all the rest of that Biblical nonsense." And then as if he had just realized who he was talking to, Richard asked worriedly, "I mean... He didn't do that... did He?"

"Do what?"

"Create Eve from Adam's rib"

"Who?"

"God!"

"'Course not. That's all evolutionary hocus-pocus. It's happened on a thousand planets."

Richard sighed deeply, greatly relieved.

"He did create the Earth though," Mick said reflectively.

"He . . . he did?" Richard stuttered, both comforted and flummoxed that Genesis proved correct. Though he had long believed in the Big Bang theory of the universe's origin, the idea of an intelligent creator, a sort of custodian like a zoo keeper who looked over the Earth, gave him a secure feeling about his place in the cosmos's scheme of things.

"'Course, he had a little help from me."

Richard gasped.

"Too right, mate. We decided to have a contest. See who could do the longest, the loudest . . . fart. College prank . . . that sort of thing."

The Devil took a sip of beer. Richard stared dumbfounded.

"Look, we were pretty young at the time, and Elihu, that's who you call God, had stoked up pretty well and let fly with a cannonade that split the heavens and sent shards out into the Milky Way. Christ, it was bloody dangerous in this part of the Galaxy, what with the sun and the moon and the asteroids swirling around.

"Well, so as not to be out done, I stepped up and let loose with a big bang of my own. It lasted a bit longer than his and when I had finished, the Earth and the rest of the planets orbited about the sun."

With a sick feeling deep in his stomach, Richard asked, "What happened next?"

The Devil shrugged.

"We declared a draw and went on drinking."

"I mean, what happened to the Earth?"

"Not much. A few billion years went by and here you are, the product of evolution." Mick saluted him. "True story."

Richard stared aghast, unable to speak for a few moments. Finally, "Mankind is the result of a farting contest between adolescents!"

The Devil winked.

"Just kidding."

He laughed so long and hard that Richard thought he was going to choke. After several seconds, he regained control

"Had you going on that one, didn't I?"

Disgusted, Richard nodded weakly and sank deeper into his lounge chair. Never in the tangles of his mind had he even glimpsed a conversation like this one.

He looked bleakly at the Devil and said angrily, "Are you really Satan?"

The Devil stared at him, his dark eyes turning strangely violet once more.

"Want me to give you the evil eye again?"

"No! It's just that I don't understand."

"What's to understand?"

"Well, everything. For instance, I wouldn't mind trading my soul for a job with a prestigious East coast law firm, and you aren't even interested. Can you imagine what that does for my self-esteem?"

The Devil shrugged.

"And now I suppose you're going to tell me that you and God aren't even at war?"

"Over what?" The Devil sounded surprised.

"For the souls of men."

Satan shook his head.

"Elihu and I aren't rivals, Richard. We're partners. We went to the same business school. Afterwards, we set up the Elite World Development Company. We weren't doing too badly either. Made enough to live on and see the Galaxy. But then we found the Earth and things started to take off. It had potential, despite the fact that it's off the beaten track. We decided to incorporate and divided the company into two branches. Elihu took on resort development and I ran the minerals and timber division. Even so, we weren't really prepared for the bonanza from the spin-off business."

"What spin-off business?"

"Souls." the Devil answered.

He shook his head sadly.

Richard stared at him.

"Look mate," the Devil said, as if explaining economics to a child, "Earth's the only planet in the Universe whose inhabitants have natural souls. Within a year, mining, timber, and resort development were all but forgotten. The rush for souls had taken over everything. We couldn't get anyone to work on anything else. As soon as we hired someone and brought them out to Sol System—I thought of that one, by the by, sort of a play on words—they would jump ship and go prospecting. We had to limit our work force to bonded contract workers. After that, we became rich beyond our wildest dreams."

"From what?"

"From the sale of souls, 'course." the Devil looked exasperated. "Don't you understand even the simplest economic theory of supply and demand?"

"I guess, souls are pretty rare," Richard replied, trying to sound suitably amazed.

"Have you ever seen one?" Satan asked.

The law student shook his head.

"No one has. I mean no human has."

"Too bad. They are beautiful." The Devil's face softened. "Souls are transparent, pulsating blue, white, and amber gems of first brilliance quality. Elihu and I called them SoulStones." Mick beamed. "My idea again. I always had a knack for marketing.

"Amber are the most beautiful and superior. Mostly they are used for healing. Blue SoulStones have the most juice and are used for powering flitters and ground transport. Most souls, though, are whites and are only good for indoor and outdoor lighting. Last forever, though."

He winked. "For a while we made a killing."

Richard winced.

"What happened?"

The Devil sighed.

"The market became glutted. On Earth there must be, I mean the ones that are left, fifteen billion or so just lying around, waiting for anyone to trip over 'em and pick 'em up. It's no longer economically feasible to deal in them anymore."

The Devil drained his Fosters. He set the can down and signaled Marvin for another. The elfin waiter replaced the can instantly with a full one, and the outline of a second Krugerrand appeared beside the first one in his vest pocket.

"So you don't buy and sell souls at all?" Richard asked, feeling let down.

The Devil shook his head and smiled at him.

"It's not like it used to be. Six thousand years ago, a soul was a rare commodity. Humans knew their worth and took pains to have them hidden away after they passed on. Stealing a soul

in those days was a real art form. I remember once when one of our agents stumbled upon the Babylonian Well of Souls. Did we have a doo. Heaps of fun. Antarean Brandy, Sirian JuJu dancers.

"Ah mate, but were we rich then; fun interesting work. It was grand."

The Devil sighed and took a sip of beer. He sat back in his chair and stared at the sky, smiling in a sad kind of way.

"What happened to the souls?" Richard asked, interrupting the Dark One's thoughts. "I mean the buying them or stealing them?"

"Well, like I said, the bottom dropped out of the market. A glut sort of like. Elihu got this big idea that he should set himself up as God. People would then commend their souls to him for safekeeping. As a marketing ploy, it worked great at first. Souls started appearing right and left, no one hiding them anymore. And what with the religious wars that followed . . . well, no lack of souls after that. Soon there were just too many for the market. We could have ridden it out, had it been temporary."

A dark glowering scowl crossed the Devil's face.

"But the bottom dropped out for real when some Altarian one-eyed, stuffed monkey of a scientist found a way to manufacture them. We claimed copyright and patent infringement, but it didn't do any good. A bunch of bleeding heart liberal politicians passed a law guaranteeing everyone the right to happiness, health and power. Elihu and I held on to our investment. There are elite clientele who demand natural SoulStones. But with all the souls lying around, it's not the same. It's hardly worth the effort to fill an order."

The Devil sighed. He drank his Fosters moodily and looked at the law student wistfully.

Inwardly, Richard shuddered at the unconcealed hunger lying within the Devil's eyes and was relieved that economic forces had rendered his schemes obsolete. Most of all, Richard was grateful he had not bargained with the Devil for his soul.

Richard hemmed, rose to his feet, holding his beach towel in front of him.

"I guess I ought to find my parents. It's their anniversary, after all . . . today, that is."

Not wishing to turn his back on the Evil One, he walked backwards gingerly, waving goodbye shyly. At what he thought was a safe distance, he turned. His feet became entangled in the beach towel and he tripped. He flailed wildly; his head angled toward the sharp edge of a brick lined planter. Unable to save himself, he closed his eyes, expecting to be killed instantly. Suddenly he felt his body slow and then stop. He opened his eyes and his forehead was inches from the planter's brick edge. Slowly his body tipped upright. As he regained his footing, he saw the Devil grinning, his head inclined toward Richard.

"*Mostly* ornamental," the Devil said.

"Th . . th . . thanks," Richard stammered.

"You're welcome," the Devil replied.

Richard smiled wanly.

"I guess I . . . I owe you for that."

"Nah. This one's on the house."

"Thanks . . . uhhh . . ."

"Call me Mick."

"Mick," Richard said shakily.

The Devil raised his Fosters in salute. "G'day, mate."

The End

Continued from page 32

She filled Auntie Mim's pocket with an F word that had lain dormant in her head for years and had never once touched her lips. Both their eyebrows leapt up in surprise. Then they were rolling on the floor.

"Oh, you *didn't*," the queen gasped.

"Not yet," the Lady Orangia admitted, feeling a sudden camaraderie not only with the women, but with life in general and the stars outside the window and perhaps even that older, grizzled General the queen had brought with her. "But I'm looging forward to it soon."

If not for the sudden tremor, this joke would have gone over winningly. Ivy's bottle tipped suddenly, lingered on its edge, then fell over and shattered.

"Oh." The queen pursed her lips. "There goes the fun."

Roger's father woke with a start. "MAIN THE MASTILS. BATTON UP THE WENCHES AND CABBAGE! SOUND THE FOX!" The cats leapt off him in alarm and whisked under nearby furniture.

"Yur dreaming, dear," his wife said, and hiccupped.

Dick blinked. "LENORE, ARE YOU DRUNK?"

Lenore giggled. "Only just a liddle."

"AND YOU DIDN'T WAKE ME?"

Lenore crawled up to spoon in his shoulder. "Innoor voishes, Rishy. Innoor voishes. Besides. It wash a woman thing, thingy."

"Do you suppose tha' was the women's walg-out?" The queen sat up.

"No," Orangia said, fully alert and worried. "That was something else entirely. *That* came from underneath. Something's coming up."

The queen's lips puckered. Her cheeks turned slightly green. "Yes," she said. "Quail's eggs and saffron for dinner. Right now. Privy?"

Orangia motioned to the kitchen and the back door. The queen of Manking took flight.

* * *

"*Titus*," Missing seethed.

"You're *really* hurting my arm," Roger said.

"What in the world is he thinking?"

"I think you've got a nerve, or possible a tendon."

Missing released his arm a little. They watched as the salt-digger sniffed her nest again, then raised her head and sniffed the air.

Shwum.

Her head turned to the opposite tunnel. Her eyes narrowed. She grunted to herself, a satisfied and frighteningly patient grunt. It said, I didn't spend all that time in chains to stop now. It said, I smell you. It said…

Here I come.

"Cub alog dragon," Titus' voice drifted back to them from some distance. "Cub away from all that lovely gold. God your eggy-peggy."

Missing narrowed her eyes. "I hope he runs fast."

"The dragon doesn't seem to move that fast so far," Roger said.

"No, but if she doesn't catch him, *I* will."

They watched a moment longer as the creature snuffled her way to the tunnel opening, then slipped through as quietly as water through a sluice. One-by-one the others emerged.

"This is bad." Ivy frowned.

"Yes. Did anyone else *hear* the thing outside?" Croomb looked at them. He was still holding his badly battered and puckered sword.

"That doesn't worry me as much as the direction Titus went," Ivy said.

Missing nodded. "Straight up into the city. It's the only path he knows."

"Well." Roger straightened his shoulders and swept his hair back. A very determined and frighteningly calm expression had settled on his face. "We'd better go after them."

Without a word, Cadaberous Bray handed the young wizard the golden sword he had used to break the dragon's chains. Roger took it up easily and swept it out in front of him once with what seemed to Missing a fairly knowledgeable swing. Something made Missing put her hand on his arm.

"No," she said. "We're not going to do it that way."

His eyes met hers. They were dark brown. A plain and unremarkable brown that made tunnels through moonlight at the end of which a certain warm and comforting light flowed. She shook her head to clear away this momentary remnant of adolescent poetry.

Roger lowered his arm and set the sword down amongst all the golden refuse. Then he picked up the lantern and led them on.

* * *

"Go back in your homes," Orangia pleaded with her neighbors.

"What? And have it fall down around our ears? I'd rather be on the streets. Besides, we're walking out today."

The queen lay her small hand on Orangia's arm. Her face was pale and had a slight sheen of sweat, but she looked mostly recovered.

"Let them," the small woman said. "Let them walk. Whatever it is that's causing all the shaking–well, perhaps it's just time."

Orangia looked at her and decided *yes, perhaps it is at that.*

The queen took a crumpled bit of paper from her pocket. "Now. According to this flyer with the lovely scrollwork along the top, the walk-out is to organize near Slickett and Pondrus-Magan. That's not too far is it? Or shall I call for a coach?"

Orangia held her up by the elbow as another tremor rolled under them. "I don't think I want to be in a coach right now."

"Yes," the queen gasped, righting herself. "It's been far too long since I've walked the streets of my own city anyway."

Then, with the barest of motions, she gathered her soldiers around them all and set off.

* * *

There was no guard at the gates of the mine. For that matter, there were no longer any gates. Missing and the others stood at the top of the hill, staring down at a large swath of rubble that led away from them, straight down into the city. At the end of it, or rather its roving genesis, they saw a moving gray hill plodding through the narrow Manking streets as if through mildly inconvenient snow drifts. A tiny figure moved before it, at least two streets away, sprinting madly. Yet the salt-digger merely lumbered on, pushing the facades of houses and shops out of her way as she did, tumbling them in on themselves like dominoes. There was a distinct lack of screaming. Where *was* everyone?

Roger dropped the lantern near the entrance and turned. "What do we do now?" Missing was surprised to see his eyes focused on her. She turned to Ivy, who was behind her. But Ivy, and Croomb, and Bray, were all looking at her.

"Why are you asking me?"

"Because," Ivy said. "You're the only one of us brave enough to touch it. Twice now. And when you slapped it and said no, it listened."

"That's just how we train the cats not to claw up the furniture," Missing said. "It's just in the tone of voice, Aunt Orangia says."

"And?" Croomb said.

"What 'and'?" Missing said, frustrated. "They just don't like–"

Their people would stand vigil in their tents, beating tribal drums in an effort to frighten away the evil spirit of the dragon.

"What? They don't like what?" Roger asked after a moment.

"The noise," Missing said slowly. "They don't like the loud noise. We don't hit them, of course. I only did that because it was so close. But Aunt Orangia slaps a wooden spoon into her hand. She even used to do that to frighten me when I put my fingers too close to the fire as a child. It sounded like lightning."

She was thinking. Things were clicking. She looked down.

"What's that?" She pointed.

Nearly perpendicular to the dragon's progress was a quickly growing crowd of moving figures.

"Oh." Ivy frowned. "That's the Black Lotus' walk-out. It was scheduled for this morning."

"So that's where everyone went." Missing watched as small tides came from side streets to join the main wave.

"They're going to run right into the creature if they aren't warned," Croomb said.

"That's *right*." Missing snapped her fingers. "They will." She turned to them.

"Gather up every pot and spoon you can get your hands on," she said. "And every other person you find along the way. Mister Croomb, you can make them come. Tell them it's their civic duty."

"What are you going to do?" Ivy asked.

"I'm going to have a talk with the Black Lotus," Missing said. "It's very important you meet up with that walk-out, all of you, with all the noisy things you can carry. If I'm right, we can drive her back to the sea. Except–" She paused.

"The egg," Roger said.

"Titus," Missing said at the same time. "He's got his scent all over the egg, and she's got the smell of him–"

"Don't worry about it," Roger said. "I'll find him and take care of it."

"You can't. Even if you got the egg away, you'd have to–"

"I'll take care of it," Roger said again, in a voice that was not to be argued with. "Toward the sea. I know."

There were perfect moments in which perfect kisses occurred. Missing had read about many of them in her books. Alone on the hill, overlooking Manking being ravaged by a salt-digging dragon, had never figured heavily into any of the novels she read. Yet it seemed the right time, and the right place. She took Roger's shirt-collar in one hand, wrapped the other around his neck and smashed their faces together.

Then, without a word, she turned and ran off toward the walk-out. As she did, she licked

thoughtfully at the bruised bottom of her lip where his top teeth had connected. He was, after all, still an inch shorter than her. But he would probably grow. And if not–well, she was satisfied that everything had ended up where it should have, whatever the result.

Ivy watched Roger put his hand to the small, violently acquired split in his upper lip. He stared down after the girl bounding away.

"I suppose I'd better." He blinked. "Yes. There was something."

"The egg, Roger," she urged him gently. "Go and get the egg."

"Egg. Right! The egg!" He shook his head and leapt away. Neither Ivy nor Croomb said anything as Cadaberous Bray followed in his wake, reigning in his long legs so as not to overtake the boy too soon.

"Come along Croomb," Ivy said. "If it's noise she wants, it's noise she gets."

* * *

Missing ran. She ran with an abandon and urgency she had never had before, ignoring things that jostled and fought for position on her body, those round parts of her she normally loathed but suddenly found surprisingly helpful. Because within that bulk there was *momentum*. Once shifted into motion, her body became its own source of gravity, drawing her downward, working for once like a perfect machine of flesh and intent. She dashed over burst cobbles and leapt across rubble–driven to a glorious and unstoppable speed that came from somewhere deep within those heavy shoulders and thick thighs.

She came upon the walk-out from a side-street and burst along its edge, where there was a small avenue of space up against the walls. As she passed she heard singing–it appeared to be something about someone's aunt, with pockets full of Male Nominated Odious Prigs of Querulous Rulers and Selfishly Tyrannizing…she lost the thread of it quickly, and it didn't seem to flow well anyway. She ducked and dodged and wove until she was nearly to the forefront, and as she passed a group of men–*men?*–she heard a voice gasp from their midst.

"Missing?"

But she did not have time for that voice. She wormed her way forward to where a small trio of colored silks moved, rose and yellow following black. Just as she was about to reach them she ran into something more solid than she, and was stopped.

"Wendley?" She looked up in amazement at the young man, who used his free hand to reach down and help her up from the ground. His other hand was tightly clenched around a roasted turkey leg.

"Hello, Missing."

"You know my name?" She stood shakily.

Prudity's fiancée shrugged, and took another bite.

"What are you doing here?" she asked.

"Mother says it's important to support your loved ones," Wendley said. "And she also says I should get out more."

"I've got to speak to Prudity," Missing told him, falling into the crowd beside him. "It's important. Can you help me get her attention?"

Wendley looked at her. One of his eyebrows rose up over the turkey leg covering his mouth and nose. Then he took the leg away and opened his jaws.

"Pruuuuuuuuuu!" he bellowed. The sound echoed over all of the singing. The three figures at the front paused, turned, and stopped. Slowly, by degrees, the crowd behind them did as well.

Most of it fell over, bumping up against the people in front of them.

The Black Lotus, resplendent in her silk and mask, stormed back to them.

"What *is* it?" she hissed at her betrothed. Iron Dandelion and Poisonous Rose formed rank to sneer at Missing.

"Missing's got something to say," he said, and went back to his breakfast.

Missing looked straight into the irate eyes of the Black Lotus. She had a feeling that for the first time, Prudity remembered *exactly* who she was.

"I need your help," she said.

"I'm a little busy having a march right now." The Lotus' gaze could have chilled a small glacier in a tropical climate. "After this, the city won't be able to ignore its women any longer."

"If you don't help me," Missing replied, "the city won't have any women to ignore. Or men, for that matter."

"What are you talking about?"

Suddenly Prudity, and most of her congregation, fell over as another shudder hit them. Missing picked herself up off the soft landing of Wendley's left thigh.

"That," she said. "There's a dragon. Two of them, actually. And they're about to tear the city apart. Look."

She pointed. Up ahead, at the intersection of two streets, the last remnant of a leathery tail passed before the marchers. Prudity's eyes widened.

"We have to drive it back to the sea."

Prudity shuddered. "How?" she whispered, wide-eyed. "We're only women."

"That's what I'm counting on," Missing said. "Ever found a mouse in the butter, Pru? Or a dog going after the bacon?"

Prudity and her women stared.

"I didn't think so," Missing said. "But those women behind you, the ones who serve, *they* know what it's like to chase the vermin away from *your* lunch. They have to, don't they? Otherwise they might be dismissed for throwing all the butter out. Want to know why women really scream at the sight of mice, Pru? It isn't fear for the butter. It's the fear of losing a *job*."

"In the butter?" Prudity repeated weakly.

Missing shrugged. "Anyone with half a mind can cut away the droppings."

Prudity turned away and retched a little. Missing tried very hard to hide her smile. The Black Lotus' minions patted their leader on the back and murmured comforting words, even while shooting scathing glances at Missing. But Prudity rose up again and looked beyond them to the wreckage strewn across their path. Then she narrowed her eyes, and looked back at Missing.

"Mice in the butter," she said.

Missing nodded.

"In *my* butter?"

"I would imagine so. They don't usually care whose butter it is. Just consider these to be some really big mice. And we've got to chase them away. If you *really* want to make an impression people won't forget, save the city."

"How?"

A few moments after Missing answered, the women of Manking began to loot.

* * *

"What is it?" Esmariah Gasp moved to the window next to Utter. The gardener was staring

down at the city.

"Can't rightly say." He squinted. "Some big thing down there, knocking houses down."

He pointed. Esmariah gazed at the moving monstrosity.

"Oh, there's another." Utter pointed to the shore where something similarly gray and enormous had slogged up onto the bank between sodden, leaning shops. It was making its way inward slowly, taking down most of anything that stood in its path. It snuffled at the wharf curiously, then swiveled its head, waiting. The early morning sun glinted off its great, wet hide, turning it momentarily silver.

"Magnificent," Esmariah breathed. "Utter. Get my coat. I shall go and see."

Utter Riley stared at her. "You mean, out there?"

But his employer had already turned and left the room.

"Thirty-two *years* we ain't been outside the walls," the man muttered. "There's no carriage. I suppose she thinks we'll just *walk*. That'd be a laugh. A Gasp, walking. Ha."

* * *

Missing emerged from a shop with three pots and some large wooden spoons in hand. The shop's owner, a woman, had come out of the crowd to open up her doors. She had willingly offered the pots, then conscientiously wrote Missing a small slip of paper itemizing the loot and indicating an IOU at the bottom. Missing shoved it into her pocket.

"Missing! What in the world?"

"Oh, hello Aunt Orangia." She looked up. "Take this, will you?" She handed her aunt a pot and spoon. Then she eyed a small, brightly dressed woman at her aunt's shoulder. "Here you go."

The woman nodded and took the pot and spoon. "They say there's a dragon," she said breathlessly, and with some excitement.

"It isn't really a dragon," Missing told her. "Doesn't have fire and wings and all. It's just a– well, I don't know what you'd call it. But we've got to get rid of it."

"And how do you intend to do that?" another small woman asked. For some reason, she was surrounded by men with swords. Missing doubted they had been invited to the walk-out.

"We're going to chase it back into the sea. Roger's gone after its egg, and it should follow. But just in case…" She banged her spoon against her pot with a satisfying *clunk*.

"How exciting," said the small woman surrounded by men. "May I help?"

Missing shrugged, and handed her the pot and spoon.

"What about Roger?" the brightly dressed woman asked. "He isn't in any danger, is he?"

"I don't think so," Missing said. "He's very brave. And if need be, he can do wonderful things with fire."

"THAT'S MY BOY!" One of the men, an enormous creature, shouted. "Oh, damn, I've done it again."

"That's all right, Richard," the first woman said. "We're outdoors now, after all."

Missing looked at her aunt for an explanation.

"Missing Sealyham," her aunt said. "Meet Lenore and Richard Sealyham. Roger's parents. Lenore, Richard, this is my niece, Missing."

"Pleased to–" she began, and stopped. "Sorry. Did you say *Sealyham*?"

"No relation," her aunt said quickly. "Trust me on that. Oh, and this is the queen."

That explained the armed men. Missing stared, completely flustered.

"Is there really a dragon under my city?" the queen asked, her eyes shining.

"Not any more," Missing said. "It's sort of–in the city now. And it's brought a friend."

"Do you think we might drive it toward the castle? I've been meaning to do a little re-modeling."

She was the sort of woman Missing had never been able to make friends with easily. Usually because Missing was afraid that if she stood too close to one, she might break her. There was also the intimidating delicate beauty to contend with, which brought up all sorts of self-esteem issues. These were the sorts of issues she hid from in her room and wrote about until they went away. But somehow, just then, she didn't really mind. The queen's face, if looked at from a certain angle, was slightly asymmetrical. Or so Missing decided to believe. Doing so made her feel better.

"I think it would be best if we just follow it and make sure it goes out to sea," she said.

"I suppose you're right." The queen nodded. "Lead on then, Lady Sealyham."

Missing turned to Roger's mother expectantly. A small, waiting silence fell. Lenore gave her a warm smile. "She means you, dear."

"Oh." Missing flushed. "But I'm not–that is you probably shouldn't call me a Lady–"

Just then the Black Lotus stormed through the crowd. Her mask was askew and she had lost her cape somewhere. She also appeared to be limping.

"Miss*ing*," she said. "We're *waiting*."

"Ur," Missing said.

"Beastly shoes," Prudity muttered. "I'm going to have blisters."

"TO THE FOREFRONT THEN, THERE'S A CLEVER LASS, HUP, HUP, HOORAH," Richard yelled. He whirled his spoon around above his head.

Missing inched forward a little toward the front of the line. Suddenly she realized there were eyes on her–many, many eyes–and they were waiting for something. Some*one*. Deep down inside, she shuddered and took a deep breath.

Then she smelled it, caught in the thousand folds of their clothes, the dung on their boots, in their hair and their flesh and their sweat. Rising up with their fear and their eagerness to see the changing of things. It came from the women all around her, and the men loitering near the edges of the walkout, uninvited but watching–perhaps jealously, perhaps resentfully, perhaps even approvingly. It didn't matter *why* they were there, so much as that they were *there*. It was the smell of moving tides, and ripples of change, and that was what she had smelled all along.

All her life. Manking. Moving. It was the smell of the old paths and the new being trod. It was the smell of the city.

Her city.

Missing straightened her shoulders and took her position at the head of the march. The queen, her aunt, and Roger's parents followed.

"Now, where were we?" The queen said.

"B," her aunt said. "We came around back to B."

"B? Are you sure?"

Missing raised her spoon, banged on her pot, and started down the street in the wake of the salt-digger. Behind her hundreds of spoons banged on pots, or pans, or whatever else they found to hit, and began to march.

* * *

"Not like that," Ivy said. "Like this." She nodded to the fellow at the front of the washing tub. He picked up his end and began to walk. She picked up her end and followed, raised the small piece

of wood she had found, and banged it down on top of the up-turned tub. It echoed through the cedar with a lovely, warm *thrump.*

"Ah," said Croomb. He turned to the small crowd of tub-bearers behind him and raised his own stick of kindling like a conductor. In unison, they raised their tubs.

Most people of reputable standing in the community had turned out to watch the women's walk-out. Ivy and Croomb found themselves rallying a large crowd of the undesirable, the whores and thieves and others. Croomb had pressed them into service with an admirable amount of bullying and thinly-veiled promises of leniency on the occasion of their next run-ins with the law.

Ivy turned her head a little to gaze down one of the alleys that emptied out onto a street horizontal to theirs. Two figures strode by, neither rushed nor ambling. One was small and bent, the other a statue of firmament.

"Hello, Esmariah," the baker said under her breath, and grinned. "Nice to see you out and about."

Chapter 13

The slightly bewildered feminist revolution met Inquisitor Croomb's enthusiastic tub-thumpers at the intersection of two streets past Penham-Wynek and the Shunts. They had diverted down an alley to catch up with the dragon and came out just in her wake. The women of Manking eyed Croomb's recruits carefully. The thieves and whores were inwardly pleased at having a stab at legally sanctioned civic duty. They skulked, leered, and slouched self-righteously.

"Orangia! How do you like my army?" Croomb waved wildly as he passed, but did not turn aside.

"Missing," Ivy shouted. "What do we do now?"

"Play," Missing shouted back. "Just play. Stay on her tail, but not too close." She had a sinking feeling in the pit of her stomach. The salt-digger's actions thus far indicated a willingness to keep following Titus and her egg. But Missing knew from past experience that if one let the ribbon dangle too far above a cat's head for too long, the cat would eventually become disinterested. She didn't think the dragon was going to become disinterested. But she was afraid the creature would soon become frustrated.

Her suspicions were confirmed all too soon. The dragon paused and sniffed the air, knocking over several merchant's stalls and a few awnings as she swiveled her head. Then she trumpeted.

The crowd, happily beating on its pots and pans, fell back with a unanimous "Hoooaaa," and a few other words that weren't nearly so flattering.

"Keep playing!" Missing shouted, turning on them. The crowd stepped back, their eyes wide and focused just over her left shoulder. Missing felt the tell-tale hot wetness of sputum and turned back, slowly.

The dragon had turned to see what sort of irritation had taken up residence in its nether regions. It lowered its head and blinked at her. Then it began to open its mouth.

"*No!*" Missing banged on her pot desperately. "Bad–ur–thing!"

The animal closed its jaws and sniffed irritably. From behind Missing someone else began banging on a pot. Aunt Orangia stepped bravely up to her shoulder, facing the dragon.

"Shoo!" she shouted.

"Shoo!" Ivy thumped her tub.

Suddenly choruses of "shoo, dragon!" rang out all around, and the crowd surged forward.

The primal instinct of all animals contains a very small, but very persistent dislike for the word "shoo." The salt-digger felt it well up, and she shook her head. Then the banging of hundreds of pots caught her attention, and she didn't like it. So she turned back to the scent of her egg and lumbered on.

The procession followed, and someone from the Tub-thumpers struck up a ditty.

"*Ooooooooooohhhh–*

"Wee Willy Winkle runs through the town–

"Upstairs and downstairs in his nightgown–

"Scratching at the windows, a-cryin' at the locks–"

"Hmph." Aunt Orangia sniffed. "He's playing our song."

"Where's Roger?" Missing yelled at Ivy. "Titus is going to lead us around the entire city."

Ivy shrugged, intent on her rhythm.

The Women's Movement listened to a few bars from the tub-thumpers. Suddenly from their ranks burst another song, right on the heels of the first in a glorious round.

"Ooooooooooohhhh–

"Wee Willy Winkle runs through the town (Auntie Mim has a–)

"Marvelous mackintosh, marvelous mackintosh, marvelous mackintosh–"

"Upstairs and downstairs in his nightgown (Aunti Mim has a–)

"Marvelous mackintosh with a pocket just for ANARCHY!"

Despite the fact that the songs were entirely different and did not even have the same tempo, somehow they fell together nicely. Very soon the tub-thumpers were adding in a bit of extemporaneous downbeat, while the pots and pans held onto the staccato upbeat.

They found Titus Sulk two streets away. Missing diverted when she saw him struggling to sit up and clutching at his nose. Ivy put down her tub and hurried over.

"This time it's broken," she said.

Missing grinned.

"He sdole by egg," Titus complained. His face was turning several alarming shades of blue.

"It was never yours to begin with. What were you thinking?" Missing glared down at him.

The boy with the beautiful blue eyes and honey voice gazed up at her. "You wode beleeb be, bud I was trying to helb. I led the dragon away from you, didn'd I?"

Missing sighed. "Oh, Titus. You led the dragon away from the *gold*. You were just trying to help yourself. Again."

He blinked. "Maybe so. Bud I tried to heb you too, Bissig. I tried to gib you whad you wanded."

Missing stepped back a little. "I–I know, Titus. But it wasn't what I needed. There's a difference. I think somehow in your mind, and mine too, those things got all mixed up."

She reached out and helped him to his feet. "Can you walk?"

"Id's by nose thad's brogen, nod my feet." He tried to grin, but winced instead. Then he clasped her hand in his so that she was forced to look into his swelling eyes. He leaned forward.

"I was righd," he said softly. "You *are* the only person thad understands me, Bissig."

"Problem is," she whispered back, "you don't understand *me* at all."

He let her hand drop and nodded. "You're probably righd."

There were sudden gasps from the crowd, and they broke apart completely as the sounds of what was real broke in. Missing saw the dragon take a sharp turn. It took out several buildings as well.

"Roger's got the egg now," she told Ivy and the others who clustered around her. Titus stood silently to one side, forgotten.

"He's going to go to the sea. Now all we have to worry about is what happens when we get there." Something in her chest curled up and whined worriedly.

* * *

Esmariah Gasp fanned Utter Riley with her hand. She had taken up position on a small rise at the northern edge of the city, by the shore. While the gardener caught his breath, she gazed down across the mid-afternoon beach to the small rise at the southern edge. Something slender and ghastly stood there, gray hair whipping around its face, while something ragged cavorted happily around its ankles.

Esmariah's eyes met those of her distant cousin, who had also emerged to view the spectacle.

She nodded slowly.

Eleganta nodded back.

They both turned to watch the progress of the sea-borne salt-digger still snuffling around the ruined shore. It didn't seem to be in much of a hurry, although it did raise its thick head occasionally and sniff the air, as if waiting for something. It snuffled amongst the wreckage of old shops, occasionally snapped at seagulls, and generally amused itself.

Then, as one, they turned to watch the progression of the creature in the city, and the small figure that ran madly before it, cradling a precious bundle in its arms.

Behind him loped a long, tall man, not quite intending to catch up, but careful to stay ahead of the dragon.

Behind all three came the city of Manking, beating their drums. Just as their ancient, ancient ancestors had done when Manking had been sheep meadows. The same way the old tribes of the shore had sat among their skin tents going through the rituals to drive away the dragon, waiting for their shaman to deliver the golden tribute.

* * *

It seemed to take forever, and the drums were beginning to give her a headache. But very soon Missing began to recognize the buildings around her and realized they were close to the wharf.

She was tired. She hadn't had much sleep in the mines, had been running around for hours, and had had enough of all this nonsense and the people who caused it by their subterfuge and manipulation. Dimly she was aware of who the two prime suspects were. She was too tired to be angry anymore, and too worried about Roger to care about them. She was looking forward to going home, crawling into her bed, and sleeping for a very long time. But not yet.

They rounded a curve and she saw the shore ahead, all of its sodden buildings leaning slightly and the waves lapping up. Then she saw a running figure turn abruptly to the left and begin making its way up the shore. Another figure followed, tattered cloak slapping around its legs. Behind them the dragon swerved, and Missing dropped her pot and spoon at last.

She heard her aunt call her name but propelled herself forward, driven by the triumphant cry of the salt-digger. For the first time, it had begun to run. She was afraid of what that meant. She broke out of the alley and sprinted along the quay, her shoes squelching on the wet cobbles.

For a brief moment, Missing and the dragon ran side-by-side, each ignoring one another in favor of their destination. Both their steps sent up cutting spray, but Missing was soon drenched where the creature only got its toes wet. Behind her she could still hear the drumming as the people of Manking filed out along the old, sunken wharf, lining up against the city's edge.

She saw Cadaberous Bray overtake Roger in a sudden surge of speed that he had kept in check for so long. The man shoved Roger from one side. Roger fell, but did not release the egg. He rolled up and went to stand, but Bray's knotty fist caught him in the jaw. Missing cried out in wordless rage. The dragon echoed her, and was answered from up the beach by something Missing dimly saw in the corner of her eye as a shadow of flesh that blotted out the sun. Roger fell back, and the egg tumbled from his grasp.

"Your *scent*, boy," Bray shouted at him. "You've gotten your *smell* all over it."

Then he grabbed up the egg and ran straight toward the shore, between the two dragons that bore down on him. Even as he ran, Missing saw him look down in astonishment, then saw shredded bits of shell stream from his arms. Yet still he continued to hold onto his cargo, wrestling with it as it became something the size of a large dog unfolded, poking out unhappily in claws and teeth from his

arms.

It bleated in terror. Its parents answered.

Missing reached Roger as he rose. She grabbed his arm and hauled him back.

"Let him go," she said. "They've got *his* scent now. He knows what he's doing. I think."

They stood side-by-side and watched Bray release the infant on the shore. It was wet, and a dark, onyx gray, all new and untouched. It whirled to hiss at him.

He stood up, his lanky shoulders stooped. Then he raised his face to meet the jaws that bore down on him and threw up his arms.

"At last!" he bellowed, and there was a catch in his voice as if he were on the verge of sobbing with delight.

They tore him apart together, and shared his halves between themselves. Cadaberous Bray became gristle between the teeth of the salt-diggers, and Missing felt a drop of saltwater sting her eyes. Their single, unified *harunks* declared him an inadequate meal. So they turned back, enraged, toward the city of Manking.

The city gave forth a sudden thunder of sound. For one moment the entire city united to pound out that primal rhythm by which each of their hearts counted their days. It roared, and echoed, raising a wall more effective against the creatures than any made of stone. It said, in no uncertain terms, that the tribute had been paid. Missing saw Prudity Grumm at the forefront, with her ladies next to her, beating madly on pots and shouting.

Shoo, dragon!

Behind them stood the ranks of their small revolution, and behind that, Manking.

Even as she sagged against Roger's shoulder, Missing thought briefly that perhaps she had been unjust. Prudity wanted to have choices–in order to have that, she had to be equal. To make herself equal she had to bring others up to her pedestal, because she would never stand for lowering herself. Missing was fairly certain that not even the Black Lotus was conscious of this. It had not really been her intent, after all. And yet the resounding clamor of the Tub-thumpers and the Pot-bangers testified to the fact that somewhere among that crowd, where their betters stood shoulder-to-shoulder with their worsers, that idea had been planted in more than just one mind. It would be vague and amorphous for a while until someone, some writer perhaps, managed to put it into words. But it would come.

And things would change.

The salt-diggers turned back to their offspring and sniffed it suspiciously. It whined and bleated and curled its tail coquettishly, fawningly, and snuffled back at them with a nose too new to be full of sputum. They didn't like its scent, but then sniffed one another's noses and found the scent lying there too. The fact that the scent lay in the grume between their teeth seemed to satisfy them that it was harmless.

Together, shoulder to shoulder, the salt-diggers ambled the last few feet into the waves. The baby complained in a whine, sniffing suspiciously at the water. The dragons merely murmured back at it and continued onward. Finally, their progeny overcame its fear when it realized it would be left behind, and trundled after them. It hit the waves like a skiff, then promptly sank. Missing watched them push the baby up above the waves with their noses, guiding it out into the sea.

She sat down on the half-sunken cobbles, feeling the water seep into her clothes, and sighed. She looked to the left and saw, on a distant hill, a bit of earth reach down to help Utter Riley stand. They turned and walked away.

She turned to the right. A scrap of old cloth and jeweled hairpins gathered its human dog and walked away.

Then she was surrounded and drawn up to her feet and a whirl of mad voices and faces assaulted her. A few feet away, Roger was being embraced.

"WELL DONE!"

"My darling boy! So brave!"

It seemed everyone wanted to congratulate him, and Roger was soon immersed in a crowd of well-wishers and winking women of marriageable age, urged forward by their mothers. He swept his hair out of his eyes and searched the crowd, but Missing shrank back, leaving him to his well-deserved rewards and all their inconveniences.

A trumpeting bugle sounded from somewhere in the city. The people of Manking turned to see a stream of armed and mounted men pouring out from the streets.

"Well, there's my Merill." The queen laughed. "Just in time."

The king of Manking arrived on the shore, resplendent in a firm façade and gleaming cloak, and the gathered masses bowed and whispered his name. He pushed his plump and much-unused charger through the crowd to his wife, then dismounted and gave her a little nod. He seemed very young to Missing, who having never seen him, imagined him grizzled and wise. But his face showed a sketchy beard neatly coiffed and some evidence of lingering gawkiness–as if he had only recently grown into his elbows and knees. The queen met him with an embrace and a fervent kiss. Missing saw the king look down at the tiny woman and ask a murmured question.

"Only just a little," she said, and winked. Then she whispered something in his ear.

At her whispered conference, the king nodded to Roger, who bowed.

There were grand words of praise spoken then. The crowd was as hushed as perfect school-children, straining to hear the words as they were whipped from his mouth by the shore-borne winds. Missing didn't hear them, and by the way people turned from her, accurately assumed they did not mention her. Just as she began to feel sorry for herself, she felt a slender arm go around her shoulder.

"You are a very clever girl, Missing Sealyham," her aunt said.

"I suppose. Can we go home now, Aunt Orangia?"

"I think that would be a good idea."

Missing and her aunt walked away, comfortably arm-in-arm, leaning on one another.

Just before leaving the wharf, Missing turned her head to see a small group making its way to the southern tip of Manking. The Black Lotus had taken off her shoes and was being carried gently along in Wendley's arms. She had wrapped her arms around his neck and appeared to be dozing on his shoulder. No one paid she nor her Ladies any attention. They were not important, just then. Prudity didn't seem to mind.

Titus glanced back, cradling his broken nose in a kerchief. For a moment it looked as though he tried to grin and wink, and despite everything, Missing felt the slightest of tugs somewhere deep inside. She had a feeling that particular tug would never really go away.

"WHAT HO, GOOD WOMAN!" A voice bellowed out behind them. "LEAVING WITHOUT US?"

Aunt Orangia turned and positively grinned. "Not at all, Dick. I assumed you would catch up sooner or later."

Roger's father lay his head back and laughed.

* * *

Missing stared.

The dragon had brushed by, her mind told her. It had not *meant* to do this. It was Titus' fault, if anyone's. But she had brushed by, intent on her egg, and the neat little houses of Penham-Wynek Lane had bowed down, one after the other. How could they not? They had already been leaning, tired and worn down from a week's worth of tremors. They had clung to their foundations as long as they could, and then given up with an exhalation of dust.

Her books, her bed, her safe attic room. Her dresser, her mirror, the many small and valueless things she treasured. Her bed-frame of words and oh–*oh*–her parent's note and the small necklace they left for her. Buried under wreckage she could not even identify as her own. Where one beam split open, another bent and broke, and was that the beam above the kitchen, or was it the neighbor's wall?

"Oh," Richard said, in the perfect voice. He came and engulfed Orangia's shoulder with his hand. "Bad luck. Your lovely home."

"You'll stay with us, of course," Lenore said. "As long as you like. Western Pressing isn't Manking, but it's pleasant enough."

But Orangia wasn't looking at her house. She wasn't looking at the last thirty years of her life, nor thinking of the quilts she had sewn by candlelight, nor the dishes, nor even the ragged cat who sat out front staring upward at the rubble, licking its tail in agitation.

She was looking at Missing.

She moved away from them and went to stand in front of her niece, blocking the view with her spindly shoulders and thin neck and severe chin. Her hair had come completely unbound, and there was dirt on her cheeks.

"Missing," she said.

Her niece's eyes were glazed. There was a hint of wetness in them. Orangia knew she had to stop it at once. Not for sensibility's sake, but for Missing's. Some things just weren't as important as they seemed to be.

"Missing," she said again. "You're tired, but this is very important, so I would like you to listen."

Missing's tortured gaze turned to a place somewhere over her right ear.

"It's just a *house*, Missing. Do you understand that? Not a castle, nor a magic-land. It was just a house, and sometimes houses fall down."

Then she reached up and put her callused and worn hand on Missing's cheek. She moved it to smooth an errant tendril of hair back behind the girl's ear.

"The important things stay standing," she said

Missing blinked, looked into her eyes, and the tears went away.

"Yes, Aunt Orangia."

* * *

The next morning, Missing rose early and crept out of the bed in Ivy's house she and her aunt had shared. Her aunt merely murmured and turned in her sleep.

Roger and his family had stayed in the castle. There had been invitations, but Missing and her aunt declined. After all that had happened, spending the night in the castle seemed too momentous, and somehow made both Orangia and Missing a little uneasy. It wasn't that they felt they were beneath the honor. They just knew they didn't belong there. The back room of Ivy's bakery seemed more comfortable to them than clean sheets and running water.

She found Ivy in the kitchen stirring a pot of breakfast over the fire. Missing sat down to a

fresh loaf of bread and butter. She didn't really feel up to speaking just yet.

"A very interesting day," Ivy said.

Missing nodded.

"One of the more interesting I've seen around here in a long time."

Missing looked at the baker, with her red hair bundled up and her plump cheeks shiny with the condensation from the bubbling pot. It occurred to her suddenly that she had known Ivy all her life, yet had never really seen her change. Even her aunt's hair had grayed over the years.

"How long have you lived in Manking?"

Ivy tilted her head thoughtfully. "I couldn't really say. All of my life, I suppose."

"You know a lot about it."

"Yes. Manking has always been something of a hobby of mine."

"Fifty years," Missing said to herself.

"What's that?"

"I was just thinking about the dragon. Fifty years it hibernates in the salt mines, digging and digging. All of that just to lay one egg. Then one year out at sea to raise it, and back underground again. Then Titus found out about it somehow, put a chain around its neck, and stole Esmariah's gold. Esmariah never said a word, because she was too proud to ask for help, and all the while Eleganta was trying to cheat her own sister, who's been dead for decades."

Ivy came to the table and helped herself to a slice of bread.

"Those two families nearly pulled the entire city down," Missing said.

"But they didn't," Ivy said.

"But they tried."

"I don't think that's what they were trying to do. The Gasps and the Sulks would be nothing if not for this city. And the city would be nothing if not for them. They just got caught up playing a game. Luckily, they both managed to move their pieces well this time."

"They were lucky someone decided to step in and stop them," Missing said. "That must have been a surprise. They didn't have anything to do with me being there."

Ivy smiled. "Are you sure?"

"Of course. *She* didn't have anything to do with me going to work for her, or–"

Click, click.

The messages to the Sulks.

The meeting of Titus, gambler, and thief of gold.

The letter, handed to her, meant for the boy who was investigating the mines.

A single guard at the gates, even after she had *admitted* to Esmariah that Roger had infiltrated the mines.

The sly dropping of hints that she would probably overhear.

And the biggest clue of all, told straight to her face, from someone other than Esmariah. Someone she trusted. Someone she felt to be an outsider, and yet wasn't, not really.

When Esmariah says the gold's all gone to the mines she means that's exactly where it went.

"Dammit," she said, remembering two figures on opposite hills above the beach.

Ivy laughed. "Don't be too hard on yourself. They've been at this for a very long time. They've had a lot of practice and are very good at it."

"Why?" Missing turned to her angrily.

Ivy shrugged. "Neither one of them gets out much. Making things happen gives them something to do."

"You know, Esmariah has a genealogy. She's traced nearly everyone's heritages back centuries.

I think she was trying to find a Sealyham heir somewhere that she could use. Aunt Orangia says there are probably lots of them around, but my parents were just tinkers, so it couldn't be me."

"Your aunt is always keeping an eye out for you."

"It's a good thing she didn't get her hands on Roger. If I had been a Sealyham, a *true* Sealyham, would she have used me to claim the Sealyham mines?"

"Only if you let her," Ivy said. She reached over and put her thumb flat against Missing's forehead. Even without looking Missing could feel the flour that seemed ingrained in Ivy's hands leaving a small, whorled imprint there. Just as she had when Missing was a child.

"But you didn't, did you? You're too clever for that. Now shouldn't you be going? You wouldn't want to be late for work."

Missing stared at her for a moment, then nodded and rose. Ivy stood as well, and pulled something out of her pocket.

"You might want to take this with you. It would do Esmariah good to know that at least one person knows one of her deepest, darkest secrets."

Missing pocketed the small object with a bitter laugh.

"But how do you know?" she asked.

"Oh." Ivy winked. "You might be surprised at what I know."

"Do you know everything?" Missing eyed her suspiciously, and with new-found eyes that were actually processing the things her brain was telling her.

"Mostly." Ivy shrugged.

When Missing stepped out of the bakery, she nearly ran into Inquisitor Croomb. He was standing outside, readjusting his doublet and fussing with his hair.

"Oh, good morning," he said.

"Hello." She smiled. "My aunt isn't awake yet, but I imagine she'll be up any minute."

"Ah, well." He waved his hand. "Really I was just in the neighborhood. Just passing by. But if she's to be up in a moment I might stop in."

"You should," Missing said. "I think she would like that. I told her how brave you were in the mines, and she said she had a few words to say to you about it. You're probably in for a scolding, but deep down she's impressed."

"Well." He flushed and straightened his shoulders. "I suppose I could handle a little scolding. Where are you off to?"

"Work. I've missed a day already. I don't want to show up late."

She left him at the door of the bakery and continued on. Here and there in the Shunts the miscellaneous night-merchant was taking down his stall, glancing often to the east to check for the rising sun. Some of them nodded to her as she passed, and she caught sight of two Glimmer Men, one atop the other's shoulders, snuffing out the candle in the lantern on the corner.

She made her way up the hill to the Gasp house and pushed open the gate. Oddly enough, the wooden rake was nowhere to be seen, but she would have ignored it even if it had been there. She had rehearsed this entrance all the way up the street.

She squared her shoulders and marched straight up the middle of the gravel drive. She reached out to grasp the doorknob without knocking, then saw it turn on its own and open inward. Utter Riley stood aside to let her enter.

Esmariah was waiting for her in the side-room. She was sitting in her chair. Her dog was curled up in her lap.

The two looked at one another.

"Cadaberous Bray is dead," Missing said. "The salt-diggers ate him. But you know that

already."

Utter snorted. "Good riddance."

Missing whirled around and narrowed her eyes. "He died saving Roger's life. Possibly saved the entire city. And all that time you thought he was stealing? He wasn't. He was trying to do what was right. He just didn't do it the way the rest of us would have. But he still tried."

Utter scowled, then scuffed his toe against the floor a little.

"Utter. Bring us tea," Esmariah said. The man turned and left. She motioned to the divan.

Missing sat, unaware of how she folded her ankles and hands just as her aunt had.

"I am sorry about Bray." Esmariah scratched her dog behind its ears. "His family served mine for generations. But they had become a bit… odd over the years. The truth is, they never really served *us*."

Missing remembered the man's strange act in the cove. "So you let him *die*?"

Esmariah blinked at her. "*You* were on the beach, if I remember correctly."

Missing pursed her lips.

"I believe Cadaberous Bray chose to die," Esmariah said. "I believe in his mind it was a higher ascension to some sort of glory. All of his fore-fathers died peacefully, at home, in bed. How much more glorious it must have been for him to literally become part of the thing he so admired. Many religions believe their gods will come to collect them after death, like so much lint under the furniture. Very few of them can actually claim to become sustenance for their gods."

It was considered a great badge of honor to die while carrying out the duty of their offices…

"That's different," Missing said.

"Not really."

"I've come to tell you I won't be able to work for you anymore," Missing said, after a moment. "My aunt's house was destroyed, and we're going to stay with friends in Western Pressing for a while."

"The Sealyhams, yes. It will be pleasant for your aunt there. It's high time she be allowed to retire and enjoy life a little. She's a very wise woman, your aunt," Esmariah said.

Missing stared at her. This unexpected sentiment, this un-veiled kindness, struck her as odd and unnerving.

"So I've come to say I won't be seeing you anymore," Missing went on. "But thank you for letting me work here. And I hope there isn't too much trouble for you, when people find out, that is."

Esmariah rose suddenly, dumping the dog to the floor. It yipped, and wagged its tail. She went to the window and looked out, blocking the light.

"I don't imagine there will be. It appears some sort of creature took up residence in my mines," the woman said. "All this time I've been spending my gold to carve out new veins of salt, the creature itself had been destroying them."

Missing eyed Esmariah's back.

"Don't you think *someone* is going to wonder where all that salt was coming from in the first place?"

"My dear girl, there have been those sorts of people around for a very long time," the woman answered. "But they aren't the ones who can revoke my shipping rights. As long as the *right* people don't mind, I manage to do business very well. Luckily, Eleganta Sulk and I–"

"You know she's insane. She thinks you're her sister, Renna."

"Ah." Esmariah shifted her shoulders. "It has, at times, given me an advantage. She was actually fond of her sister. Therefore she and I–or she and Renna, who can tell?–have agreed upon a lucrative partnership in order to get both of our mines back into shape. It doesn't appear the

Sealyhams are interested in selling their mines just now, so she and I will have to share the costs of labor and filling in the caverns against the rising tide that might flood our tunnels."

"But if you do that–" Missing said.

"Collapsing those caverns will change the shoreline of Manking dramatically, and cut off all access from the sea to the underground coves," Esmariah went on as if she hadn't heard her. "Eleganta and I are negotiating with the king to allow him access to our portions of the shore for his new quay. I don't doubt the endeavor will be profitable for all involved."

"That's cheating," Missing said. But she wasn't really all that surprised.

"No. I believe it is called capitalism. Manking stopped being a monarchy a very long time ago when the Sealyham sisters bought them out. It wasn't much of a kingdom back then, anyway. A few stone houses, a small outlook on a raised motte by the sea, constant bickering with the local sheep-herding tribes over grazing rights. We let them play at making laws, they leave us alone to provide their wealth. It is…understood."

"I see," Missing said. She did. She didn't like it, but she *saw* it.

"Do you want to know how much my great-great-decades-old grandmother Gasp paid for her portion of the mines under the city?"

The dog whined uneasily in the silence.

"Fourteen skin tents, twelve iron pots, and seven red ribbons for the chieftain's wife. And *they* left laughing, thinking they had cheated her. After all, she had bought a dragon's lair. They didn't know their own shaman had sold them out by telling her what the dragons actually *did*. Apparently the shaman had grown tired of being the sacrificial lambs every fifty years. They stayed on to serve the Gasps. It was a much easier life for them. It ensured longevity. The Sulks and Sealyhams have never had the advantage the Gasps have in that respect."

"Neither have they had as much trouble," Missing said.

There was no answer. The dog grew bored and went to sniff around Missing's feet.

"What will you do with all that gold in the nesting cave?" Missing asked.

"It's all Gasp gold," Esmariah told her. "I shall put it back into the Gasp coffers, where it belongs."

"You didn't even need to bother with it in the first place, you know. If you had just told someone, or had Bray investigate a little more, or even gone *yourself*–"

"I don't like to go out," Esmariah interrupted her. "I find the city to be–disturbing. I have always had a delicate constitution."

She shrugged, and might have lifted up the firmament of heaven, had it rested on her shoulders.

Suddenly Missing understood there was a greater tie between them than she had ever imagined. The difference was, *she* had been forced away from her windows. Esmariah never had. So the Lady Gasp continued to concoct her fairy-tales and drive her characters over cliffs from the lonely solitude of her hill-top castle, wrangling with her nemesis on the far-off rise.

"Well." Missing stood up, and reached into her pocket. "I should be going. Our carriage leaves at noon."

"You will come back, you know." Esmariah turned and met her eyes. "You will come back to Manking, Missing Sealyham. I would say good-bye, but I don't think you and I have seen the last of one another. You have its dirt under your fingernails. Every morning, when you wake in your Western Pressing bed, Manking's smell will call to you. And you will come back."

Missing's hand froze around the small, cool object in her pocket.

"Maybe that's so," she said. "But if I do, I'll be different. I'll be changed. Because people

change, you know. Most people, anyway. And it isn't nearly as bad as I thought it would be."

The Lady Gasp's eyebrows rose only the slightest bit. It was as close to a smile as she could manage, after a year without practice.

"I have found your employment to be satisfactory," she said. "I have a small gift for you, as well as your wages. They are on the table." Then she turned back to the window.

Missing looked at the side table and saw a small cloth pouch sitting atop a book. She tucked the pouch into her pocket, displacing the item she drew forth from it. Then she lifted up the book, put the golden dog in its place, and left the room.

She found Utter Riley outside with a tray in his hands. Missing saw that it had only been set for one.

"Didn't think you'd be staying," he said.

"No. But I may come to visit," Missing said. On impulse she leaned over and kissed his bald head.

He laughed, showing off what few teeth he had left. "Yer a good girl, Missing Sealyham. Got your heart in all the right places."

Then he turned and took the tray in to Esmariah, and Missing left the house.

Roger met her outside the gates. He was dressed as finely as any young lord, and for the first time Missing thought he actually fit into his elbows and knees. He was crouched down in the shadow of the walls, casting his runes. When she appeared he gathered them up, but not before she saw a small ivory bird resting against a large brown button.

"Was it terrible?" he asked. "Did she yell?"

Missing laughed a little. "No. She took it very well. She even gave me my wages, and a gift." She showed him the book.

"An Illustrated Book of Legendary Creatures for the Young Reader?" He read the title. "What sort of gift is that?"

Missing opened the book to the pages marked by a slender, golden ribbon, and showed him.

"Oh," he said.

"Tell me about Western Pressing," she said, moving back down the hill.

"I think you'll like it. It's like Manking must have been once, when it was smaller. Except without the dragons."

They paused a moment to watch a young woman furtively nailing a bit of parchment to a doorway. She turned and saw them, then dashed over and pushed another piece of paper into Missing's hands from the bundle slung in a bag over her shoulder.

"Here," she whispered. Her brown eyes shone under a tangle of hair and simple peasant blouse. "There's a meeting just for women." She scowled at Roger warningly, then pointed at the words.

"Says it's to discuss Overthrowing the Tyrannical Oppression of the working class woman, and draw up a proposal of amen-amenders–"

"Amendments," Missing told her. "Amendments to current Manking laws to be presented to the king."

"If you want my opinion, it's the queen you should talk to," Roger said.

The young woman raised one eyebrow, indicating that his opinion held as much weight with her as soap bubbles.

Missing eyed the small black flower at the bottom of the announcement. "If you see the Black Lotus, tell her something for me. Tell her Missing Sealyham says she's very close to getting it right."

The girl's eyes widened. "Do you *know* the Black Lotus?"

"Yes." Missing smiled. "We're old friends."

"She's a revolutionary." The girl's eyes misted over. "*I've* been invited to the wedding, you know."

"Lucky you," Missing said. "I'm afraid my invitation was lost in the mail."

They left the girl madly scurrying to nail up her flyers before the business owners rose and protested.

They walked in silence for a moment, until Roger tugged at her sleeve. Missing followed him into the shadowy doorway of a nearby and still-sleeping shop.

"Do you mind that I didn't tell you who I was?" he asked, standing only a breath away. "My father was going to come himself–we always have to worry a little about what the Sulks and Gasps are plotting–but I told him it was time I became a man and looked after the family interests. He and mother both thought it was a good idea."

"I probably should mind," she said. "But I don't think I do, really."

"I'm sorry I broke Titus' nose. It was the only way. He wouldn't let go of the damned thing."

"That's all right, Roger. I don't mind *that* at all." She took a deep breath.

"And I don't mind if you kiss me either," she said.

There was some inexpert but earnest fumbling and a lot of giggling, which Missing took as a good sign. In the end everything, ended up where it seemed to belong, and for a long time they stood with their arms around one another in self-congratulatory satisfaction.

"Was that all right?" Roger looked into her eyes.

She took a deep breath. Something went *click.* Only this time it wasn't in her head.

"It's different," Missing said. "But I don't mind."

Epilogue

"The Sealyhams, like the Gasps and the Sulks, have over time acquired their share of bastard children. From them issued the remnants of other families, farmers and merchants and tinkers who still carry the old name. And perhaps, in a less crowded world, might come back and claim birthrights and be entitled to a small pittance of family inheritance.

But the world is large, and towns like Delasbourg small, and sometimes those whose lives are difficult are too busy to tell their heirs of their family connections. Sometimes they just get lost. And so a Sealyham may one day meet up with another Sealyham, and believe it is completely by coincidence they have similar names. And those Sealyhams may even have lives together without fear of repercussions. Their children will most likely not turn up with the trembles.

It is a crowded world. The Gasps and Sulks and Sealyhams have spread so that they may not even know one another any more, nor even bear the same name. Farmers farm, merchant merchandise, and tinkers travel. And by coincidence or incidence, they may find themselves more tightly bound to their acquaintances than they could ever have imagined. But only if they are told by someone who knows better than they."

Esmariah signed her name to the last page of her journal. She took up the scrap of paper from her spy–the one who had gone south from Western Pressing to Delasbourg, and all the riches of information that tiny town held–crumpled it, and threw it for the dog to chase. Then she let her hand stroke the cool, smooth surface of her mother's golden dog figurine.

Finally the Lady Gasp unrolled her meticulous genealogy, took up her quill, and carefully blotted out any mention of the Task family, its offshoots, and its relation to the Sealyhams. Next to the word *missing* she printed *FOUND*.

The End

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